

RAYMOND'S HEROINE.

DÜRR'S COLLECTION OF STANDARD

AMERICAN AND BRITISH
AUTHORS.

VOL. 71.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

RAYMOND'S HEROINE.

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LEIPZIG: ALFRED DÜRR.

1883.



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RAYMOND'S HEROINE.

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Die angeborenen Bande knüpfe fest,
An's Vaterland, an's theure, schliess' dich an,
Das halte fest mit deinem ganzen Herzen!
Hier sind die starken Wurzeln deiner Kraft;
Dort in der fremden Welt stehst du allein,
Ein schwankes Rohr, das jeder Sturm zerknickt.
Schiller.

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LEIPZIG: ALPHONS DÜRR.

1867.

RAYMOND'S HEROINE

Die ungeschickten Hände knippte fest
An's Vaterland, an's Glück, an's Heil, an's
Das hatte fest mit seinen kühnen Hosen
Hier stand die starke Waise, der Mann
Dort in der Fremde, wo sie stand, der Mann
Ein schwarzer Rott, das jeder Mann verachtete
Schiller

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COPYRIGHTED EDITION

LEIPZIG: ALPHONS DEER

1887

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RAYMOND'S HEROINE.

Part I.

MINNIE.

CHAPTER I.

BLACK MOOR FARM.

A GABLE-ROOFED, lattice-windowed house, small and antique, but not the less solid and comfortable, flanked by a labourer's cottage on one side and by a range of diminutive out-houses on the other, with a tiny flower-garden in front and a dark-green background of trees rising up behind—such was Black Moor Farm five-and-twenty years ago.

A smiling place enough in itself, but unfortunate in the prospect it overlooked. For the gate at the end of the pretty flower-garden opened on a flat, dreary expanse of moorland, which only a scanty covering of grass and a few clumps of furze-bushes redeemed from utter sterility. This was the Black Moor, thus styled from that peculiar darkness of soil which tells its tale so plainly to those who have travelled through the coal districts of the North of England. A sullen, desolate waste this same Black Moor was—a place where Nature seemed to be in perpetual mourning over the buried

fertility of a ruined world. In its black eerie barrenness the plain appeared wider than it was; in reality not much more than a mile and a half can have intervened between the farm and a straggling row of deserted, half-ruined-looking cottages, which skirted the opposite or north side of the moor, and behind which rose a long low line of hills shutting in the horizon.

For any one versed in the local annals, the grimness of the scene was increased tenfold by the sight of those tenantless dwellings with their smokeless chimneys and broken windows. The Black Moor has a tragic history, and yonder empty cottages, while they stood, were ghastly mementoes of it. A coal-pit was worked here once, and those said cottages, built for the occupation of the pit-men, promised to become the nucleus of a large village, possibly of a prosperous town. But one day the miners were surprised at their work by a sudden blast of fire-damp; some scores of men who had seen the sun shining on the Black Moor that morning saw its light no more, and the cottages were left untenanted save by weeping widows and orphans, who in a few weeks were dispersed to the four winds to seek what lot might await them in the absence of their bread-winners. The abandoned homesteads were never occupied again, the damage caused by the accident being so extensive that the works were not re-opened; and the embryo village—already ambitiously dubbed North Hollsworth, after the flourishing little township of Hollsworth on the southern side of the moor—gradually fell into ruins.

Only one dwelling continued to be inhabited—a miserable ale-house, still retaining the sign of 'The Black Man,' which it had assumed in compliment to its original patrons. The landlord was an old man and averse to moving; and though

of regular customers he had now few or none, a road ran by his door along which on market-days a sufficient number of thirsty drovers journeyed to make it just worth his while to keep his house open.

The road in question skirted the northern and western sides of the moor, joining the London road near the southwest corner, not far from the place where, in hideous blackness, yawned the entrance of the disused coal-pit. As may be imagined, this spot in particular was held in evil repute by the country folk of the neighbourhood, the pit-hole being known to them by the ill-omened name of the 'Devil's Coal-cellar.' The uninhabited cottages looming on the northern horizon, spectral-looking as they were, seemed less dreary to behold than the black abyss down which human beings had descended to meet a dark, horrible death in the hidden recesses of the earth. Even grown men, finding themselves near the Devil's Coal-cellar after nightfall, were apt to pass with bated breath and accelerated pace; while, as for the children of the district, it was very rare that they ventured near the place at all save in large bands and in broad daylight. And, so far at least as the children were concerned, the superstition which taught them to eschew the spot was a very wholesome one, since a new accident might easily have happened there. The rough fence erected round the mine when the works were closed had been gradually broken down by time and weather, and had not been replaced, so that the mothers of the neighbourhood were not unnaturally wont to view the hole as a kind of ogre's trap or pitfall set expressly for the ensnarement of their darlings. However, whether by force of instinct or parental warning, the dreaded catastrophe did not occur, and, no steed having been stolen, the stable-door continued unlocked as before.

It was about three quarters of a mile from this inauspicious south-west corner that the Farm was situated, on the south side of the moor, and directly facing the deserted hamlet of North Hollsworth. Half a mile or so further on, still following the southern border of the waste, one came upon the village of Hollsworth proper, a snug, pleasant little place, peeping out from a bushy green wood, in which it seemed to be half imbedded. It was strange indeed to see how richly this cold, desolate Black Moor was fringed with verdure along the whole of its southern boundary—a juxtaposition of contrasted barrenness and fertility only to be accounted for by a similarly abrupt diversity of geological formation. Thus Black Moor Farm and the neighbouring village of Hollsworth, sketched by a spectator on the moor, would have made as pleasing a picture as an admirer of quiet rural scenery could desire; while, on the other hand, a view taken from the front windows of the farm or village would have been pronounced, if not precisely unpicturesque, certainly not smiling or pretty.

Still, sunshine and spring weather will always go some way towards lighting up the weirdest scene; and even the view over the Black Moor might almost have been called pleasant as, on a fine evening in early spring some five-and-twenty years ago, a woman stood at the gate of the pretty flower-garden in front of the farm-house, holding a little girl by the hand, while together they looked with smiling eyes over the waste. Following the direction of their gaze, there might have been descried athwart the level sunbeams two figures, a man and a child—a little girl this also—who hand in hand came towards them across the moor.

‘See, Amy dear,’ said the woman, ‘there are father and Minnie coming back at last. Poor child! I hope the walk

hasn't been too much for her, but I could not keep her at home when she begged so.'

'Amy wanted to go too,' reproachfully pouted the little one, a tiny, brown-eyed thing some four years old. 'But mother wouldn't let Amy go—not even when father said please.'

'Because Amy isn't big enough to have her own way in everything—not even when father says please,' returned the mother fondly, stooping down to stop the child's mouth with a kiss. 'Wait till you are as old as Minnie, and you shall get long enough walks then. There, run and ask Minnie how she liked it.'

She held open the gate for the child, who ran out eagerly towards the new-comers and in half a minute more was lifted high from the ground to receive a big kiss from father. Another minute, and the three—father and daughters—had reached the gate where the mother stood with beaming eyes waiting to welcome them.

'Well, John dear, so you are back at last! I hope you have not quite knocked up my little Minnie.'

'No, he hasn't,' said Minnie stoutly, 'I'm never tired when I'm with father. I am sure Amy would have been, though, wouldn't she, father? It was such a very long way, you know, and Amy is so little.'

And Minnie tossed a graceful little head over which six winters had barely passed.

Her father looked at her proudly, and began twisting a rich golden curl round one of his large sunburnt fingers.

'Did you ever see such a puss as it is?' he chuckled exultingly. 'Why, we've walked six mile if we've walked a step, and yet the monkey won't cry tired, nor wouldn't if it was twice as far. Anything to be with father, hey lass? I carried her a bit at times, so you needn't look so scared, Polly,' he added suddenly, answering a surprised glance

from his wife. 'Lord bless you, you needn't be afraid of my forgetting what the little legs are made of.'

'I am not afraid of your forgetting anything where the children are concerned, or I either,' replied the wife, smiling up fondly into his face. 'You are a good father and a good husband, John, if ever there was one.'

'I'm glad you think so, Polly, I'm glad you think so. I try to be, God knows—and with such a wife and such children as I've got, it would be hard if I didn't succeed. But take us inside, my girl, and let us have our tea. Minnie and I are starving, pretty near, ain't we little 'un?'

He drew his wife's arm within this own, and went with her towards the house, the two children bounding before them.

They were a good-looking couple, this husband and wife—he with his manly bronzed features and powerfully framed figure, she with her gentle face and graceful feminine bearing. And yet, good-looking as they were, and happy as they seemed together, a superficial observer, unaware of the perfect love which united them and smoothed down all apparent disparities, would scarcely have pronounced them a well-assorted pair. There was a refinement about the wife, both in manner and appearance, which was wanting to the husband who—partly because he could not help it, partly from mere carelessness and defiance of the world's opinion—looked and spoke a great deal more like the rough honest-hearted yeoman than like the polished gentleman that he was not.

So far it might be said that the marriage on the part of the wife was a *mésalliance*; and indeed the same had been said pretty loudly by her friends at the time it was contracted. Not that she had come of a stock much superior to his own, but her father had made a fortune in business

of which she inherited her due share; and John Haroldson when she married him was only a farmer's son, with few worldly possessions save a handsome honest face, a warm heart, and a quick temper. The last of these speedily brought him into trouble with his wife's only surviving relations, a brother and sister, who, never disposed to look on him with favour, soon found, or said they found, that there was no getting on with him. He would not brook being advised by them, and they could not, or would not keep their advice to themselves; so, as Mrs. Haroldson always took part stoutly with her husband, all communication between her and her family had been given up for years. The brother, with his ample inheritance, had betaken himself to Australia, where he was reported to be amassing a large fortune. The sister had married a wealthy merchant of St. Austin's, a large northern seaport from which Hollsworth is not more than twenty miles distant; but in spite of their comparative proximity, the two sisters, Mrs. Fanshawe and Mrs. Haroldson, lived as estranged as though half the globe had separated them.

Perhaps John Haroldson's shortcomings might have been looked upon by his wife's relations with more lenient eye if he had succeeded better than he did in worldly matters. But somehow he was not cut out to be a prosperous man. After his marriage he made an attempt to establish himself in business, but fortune, or perhaps his own idiosyncrasies declared against his success; and when the greater part of his and his wife's joint possessions had been thrown away in the vain endeavour to gain a footing in the commercial world, he gave up the task in disgust, resolving to return to his original and more congenial vocation of farming. It was at this time that Mr. and Mrs. Haroldson settled at

Black Moor Farm, which, though very small and yielding proportionately diminutive profits, suited them better than a large place would have done, especially as their income was eked out by a yearly sum arising from the remains of their former property invested at a high rate of interest in a local joint-stock company. Here their two children were born, and here, in spite of comparative poverty and almost total seclusion from the world, the happiest years of their lives were spent.

The family had now entered the house, and were assembled in the spacious front kitchen which, save on specially festive occasions, was their ordinary sitting-room, and which looked so comfortable with its sanded floor and raftered roof as fully to justify their preference.

‘Let me see, this is Captain Pullyn’s night,’ said Mrs. Haroldson, as she applied herself to the task of tea-making. ‘I always have to allow three extra spoonfuls at least when he is coming.’

‘I forgot to tell you—you need not make tea for him this evening, Polly,’ said the farmer, looking up from the corner where he was sitting with a little daughter on each knee. ‘I met him this morning, and he was going to St. Austin’s for the day and won’t be back till dark. He’ll look in then if he has time.’

Captain Pullyn was a retired master in the merchant service living at Hollsworth; and in spite—or, as the village gossips said, because—of sundry eccentricities, was the only person in the neighbourhood on anything like intimate terms at the farm, where he regularly spent two evenings of each week.

‘And what have you and Minnie been doing all this time, John?’ asked the wife, as she set a chair for her husband

at the tea-table. 'You have not told us a word yet of your adventures.'

'Well, there isn't much to tell, is there, Minnie? Except that the folks at Stockdale Farm seemed very glad to see us, and set down Minnie to a famous feast of roasted apples while I went to look at the beasts. And regular beauties they were, Polly, and no mistake.'

'Oh yes! beauties,' said Minnie, looking up from a basinful of bread and milk. 'And white sugar to eat them with, that you sprinkled on them with a spoon pricked all over holes, just like our pepper-castor. Wasn't it funny?'

'You little goose, I wasn't thinking of your apples. It was the beasts I meant, Polly, the finest lot you ever saw, and safe to be worth two hundred pound next year if they're worth a farthing, or two hundred and fifty more likely—put it down at two hundred and fifty. So I've made up my mind to bid as high as a hundred for them (we can stand that, you know), and if we get 'em—as we are pretty sure to, for there ain't anybody likely to give as much—that will make a hundred and fifty clear profit, do you see—clear profit. And then hey for another two hundred pound in the St. Austin's Grand Consolidated General Agency Company, with a silk gown for mother and the two biggest dolls in the toyshop window for my two little pussy-cats.'

'That's me,' cried Minnie, nodding her curled head rapturously—'me and Amy. But you haven't told them yet half the things we did, father. After the apples were done and father was ready, we said good-bye and went away, and presently we got into a beautiful field—oh! such a beautiful field—where there were primroses growing. Father set me down—I had been riding on father's back, you know—and we stopped a long while and gathered the biggest

nosegay I ever saw, all for mother and Amy. They would have been so pleased with it, but I was very stupid and left it behind at the Black Man.'

'The Black Man! I'm afraid you and father are not to be trusted together. What! after the roasted apples did he take you to run up a score at the Black Man?'

'And I shan't take her there again in a hurry,' said the farmer. 'They are a deal too high and mighty for my custom, to say nothing of having to wait a quarter of an hour before you can get what you want. I wouldn't have gone there, only Minnie was thirsty and wanted a drop of water, but I little knew the fuss we should have to get it.'

'Indeed, how was that?' asked his wife.

'Why, when we got to the place, after going well-nigh ten minutes out of our way for it, there didn't seem to be a soul about. We went into the bar-room, and there was nobody there, and then into the kitchen, and there was nobody there, and after that we got poking into the very stable-yard, and there was nobody there either.'

'Except a horse,' chimed in Minnie. 'We heard him neighing, and father lifted me up to peep at him through a hole in the stable-door. A pretty grey horse he was, and turned round his head quite pleased when I called to him. Wasn't he a nice old fellow, father?'

'Yes, I don't expect it's often there is a bit of horseflesh like that at the Black Man,' said the farmer. 'Well, as I was telling you, I suppose they heard our voices at last, for presently Mrs. Underwood puts her head out of an upstairs window and calls out to know what we were doing in her yard, as cross as if we were thieves. So I told her what we wanted, and when she found it was me she seemed to get a trifle more civil, and came down with a glass of water for

the child, and I had a drop of beer for the good of the house. I said we had had hard work to get anybody to hear us, and she answered, in her sulky kind of way, that she was upstairs giving her husband his dinner, and that the stable-boy had gone home for a couple of days for a holiday—nothing for him to do, she said. And they don't take the way to get much to do, either, if they don't treat their customers better than they've done to-day.'

'It isn't poor old Reuben's fault,' said Mrs. Haroldson apologetically. 'He was always civil and obliging as long as he was able to look after things himself.'

'No, it isn't poor Reuben's fault, except that he was a fool at his time of life, with one foot in the grave as you may say, to go and marry a young wife for no reason in the world but that she had got a handsome face. Any one with half an eye might have known it wouldn't turn out well.'

'It was very foolish of him of course, but, John, we have no reason yet to say that it has turned out ill.'

'Haven't we though? Look at her eye the next time you see her, and say if you think she has got the kind of temper to be happy sitting at home nursing an old bed-ridden husband. No, it would have been a deal better for her, and him too, if she had stopped behind the tobacconist's counter at St. Austin's till she got somebody of her own age to make up to her. And it would have happened some day, I don't doubt; she was a handsome girl in spite of her black looks, and there are young fools in the world as well as old ones.'

'She was very handsome certainly, and is still. And she is quite aware of it, I fancy.'

'You are about right there, Polly. Her head was turned with admiration long before she married old Reuben; he would never have had a chance of her but that she knew he

had a trifle of money laid by, and thought maybe it was more than it is. No wonder she finds the change dull when it was only last year she had half the young men of St. Austin's coming every day to look at her.'

'No wonder indeed. Poor foolish old Reuben!'

'Ay, and married ones too, if all tales are true. Why, it was even said that Mr. Lee . . . Not that I believe that part of it, you know—a practical steady-going man of business like him don't run off the course in that manner. Look here, Polly, isn't it time these young 'uns were in bed? They have had their supper, and here is Miss Amy nodding her head off already. And Miss Minnie is beginning to keep her company, I think.'

'I ain't,' said Minnie indignantly. 'Oh! do say I may stay up a little tiny bit longer, father—just till the candles come in. I'm bigger than Amy, you know.'

'So she is,' said the farmer, looking appealingly at his wife, who stood near ready to carry off both the children for execution. 'Yes, let her stay till the candles come in—it won't be long first—poor little pussy.'

Minnie rubbed her cheek gratefully on her father's rough hand as it lay on the table, and he smiled delightedly, as though well satisfied at having earned such a reward. She was his eldest-born, this pretty golden-haired little fairy, and it was tacitly understood in the household that if there was any inequality in the love which John Haroldson lavished on both his children, the scale inclined in Minnie's favour.

Amy was roused with some difficulty, and her fat little cheeks having received one pair of reverberating kisses from her father and another from Minnie, she was on the point of being led off to her solitary bed when a ring at the door-bell sounded the signal of a respite.

‘The captain, as sure as a gun,’ cried the farmer, striking his hand on the table. ‘Run, children, see who will get the door open first.’

Amy was wide awake now, and bounded after her sister towards the door, both children animated by a manifest zeal which sufficiently proved that the crusty old sea-captain had his good qualities.

The dusk was gathering fast, but there was still light enough for the children to recognise their old friend.

‘Cap’en, cap’en,’ cried little Amy, ‘come into the kitchen, cap’en, and tell mother Amy mustn’t go to bed. Amy isn’t sleepy now.’

‘What do you think, captain,’ said Minnie, ‘I have just been walking six miles. All the way to Stockdale Farm and back. Isn’t it famous?’

But the captain did not answer, and walked straight into the kitchen without a word.

Mr. Haroldson came forward to welcome him, but even then the visitor only gave a slight mechanical salutation, and, making for his accustomed place in the chimney-corner, seated himself, still in silence.

‘Hollo, what’s up now?’ said the farmer. ‘Polly, make haste and light a candle—the captain can’t see to shake hands.’

The joke did not take, for the captain remained silent some moments longer, while Mrs. Haroldson fumbled on the chimney-piece to find the matches. At last he spoke, but even the children started as they heard his voice—it was so unlike the familiar one they were used to.

‘I have just come from St. Austin’s. You haven’t heard the news yet, I suppose?’

‘News—no,’ said the farmer. ‘What kind of news?’

‘Bad. Lord help us all, very bad. Walter Lee has gone off, and carried all the ready money of the Grand Consolidated along with him. He must have been tampering with the funds for a long time back, they say. Nobody seems to know the rights of it exactly, but it comes out pretty plain that the Company’s shares ain’t worth the paper they’re printed on.’

The light of the newly-lit candle, falling on John Haroldson’s face, showed the features pale and rigid as though they had been hewn out of marble.

‘Then I am a ruined man,’ he articulated hoarsely, and, suddenly tottering, he fell back on the chair from which he had risen to greet the captain, and buried his face in his hands with the quick spasmodic movement of a strong man in his agony.

CHAPTER II.

THE DAPPLE-GREY.

FOR two or three minutes there was a stillness as of death among the little group.

Mrs. Haroldson, pale and trembling, sat looking at her husband without strength to speak to him a word of comfort; and the two little girls, vaguely understanding that a great calamity had fallen upon the household crept up to her side in mute awe-struck wonderment. At last the captain broke silence.

‘Come, mate,’ he said kindly, clapping his broad palm on Haroldson’s shoulder, ‘you mustn’t take on like this. Think of your wife and children, and bear up for their sakes if you can’t for your own.’

A convulsive quiver shook the farmer's burly frame from head to foot; it was precisely because he did think of his wife and children that the blow had fallen upon him so heavily.

'Yes, yes, it's very hard, I know, but you must keep your colours flying for all that. Only look what a young man you are compared to me, and every penny I've got, pretty nigh, is gone the same way. Little I thought ever to go afloat again, I promise you, but I must now. And there's my boy Joe whom I'd set my heart on bringing up for a gentleman and a scholar—and he's got the stuff for it in him if ever a little chap had—he must go to a cheaper school now, or p'raps none at all. It's a bad job, for the masters are so pleased with him, and eleven's just the age when a boy takes in most. But I keep up my spirits, bless you, I keep up my spirits—there's something tells me Joe will make port yet.'

And the captain gave vent to a sound that was intended for a great cheery guffaw, but which a curious obstruction in his throat turned into something not unlike a sob.

'We ain't the only ones, nor yet the worst off,' he went on after a pause. 'I'm sorry for Mrs. Haroldson there, but how would she like to change with poor Mrs. Lee, who has been lying all day half dead, moaning and groaning after the rascally scoundrelly villain that has deserted her? And there's poor young Raymond Lee, the son, reading for honours at Oxford, where I'd meant to send Joe too when the time came—how would you like to be him when he hears that his father is a blackguard and a thief, whom the gallows would be too good for? A fine young fellow he is as ever stepped; I always took to him from the time he had that stand-up fight at school three years ago for little Joe. It isn't every big boy ready to leave school who would

trouble himself about a little 'un just come in; but there were a couple of great hulking chaps trying to put upon Joe and chaffing him because, mayhap, his father wasn't such a fine gentleman as theirs, and young Lee told them to have done, and they wouldn't, and with that he fought them and gave them such a devil of a thrashing as I'll be bound their timbers show the marks of to this day. A fine fellow—a magnificent fellow. And to think of him having such a father!

Haroldson made a movement of impatience; wrath at last supplied him with speech.

'Curse the father and the son too!' he burst out. 'Curse them—curse them ten times over for what they have made me and mine suffer.'

'This won't do, mate, 'pon my word it won't do. Better leave the cursing alone altogether in my opinion, but anyhow you mustn't mix up the innocent and the guilty. Come, come, things are bad enough without making 'em worse, and if you work yourself into a passion like this you'll break your poor wife's heart, and you know you will.'

The argument thus used, and perhaps a certain accent of authority audible in the captain's voice, did not pass without effect. Haroldson seemed to make a violent effort at self-control, and having muttered a few words fiercely to himself, relapsed into silence. Presently, with a new effort, he spoke again—this time in tones weak and husky, but constrainedly calm.

'You have told me nothing yet. How did it all happen? Why didn't they stop him?'

'I suppose because he was too sharp for them, the scoundrel. It seems, though, the directors have been getting a little suspicious lately; but instead of grappling him at once,

they fussed and palavered, and talked about getting an assistant-secretary to help him with his work, and in one way or another gave him time to get frightened. Well, things went on so a good while, and at last an assistant-secretary was engaged, and was to come into the office this very day, and there was to be a meeting of the Board, and a grand overhauling of the books, and I don't know what. It was all very cleverly arranged, I dare say, but you see Lee was one too many for them, and when the office was opened this morning he never showed face in it. They sent to his house three mile out of town to see what the matter was, and found Mrs. Lee in a terrible state, for he had gone out the evening before to visit a friend and hadn't been home since; she was afraid some harm had come to him—though, poor soul, she didn't guess what. They searched and searched, but couldn't get to hear anything of him, and at last somebody thought of breaking open the desk where he kept his papers. And sure enough the first thing they found was a letter directed to Mrs. Lee, bidding her good-bye before he was off across the sea, and begging her to forgive him, for the devil had got hold of him and he couldn't help himself. With that poor Mrs. Lee fainted right off, and has never properly come to herself since, and the Company's people went back to the office to see after the books and the strong-box. They were not long of finding out then that he had gone off with everything that could be taken, and had been cheating them with false accounts for years back into the bargain. The Grand Consolidated has been a humbug all along, but there is one person will have made a good thing out of it, and that's Walter Lee.'

'He shan't,' cried Haroldson fiercely, while his face, so pale a minute before, suddenly flushed purple with passion.

‘Who is he that he is not to be caught and punished like other robbers? It will be easy enough to lay hands on him; he can’t be far off yet.’

‘I don’t know about that—it is just the contrary, I’m afraid. A vessel put out of St. Austin’s this morning for Rotterdam, and it’s as certain well-nigh as anything can be that Walter Lee was aboard of her.’

The farmer’s countenance fell, and for a moment he was silent. Presently he seemed to recover himself, and shouted vehemently:

‘I don’t believe a word of it. What! do you mean to tell me that the people at the harbour, where he is so well known, would be such fools as to let him go out of the country without scenting something wrong, or do you think for that matter he would be such a fool as to make the venture? He would try every port in England before St. Austin’s, I can tell you.’

‘So I should have said too,’ answered the captain, ‘but it seems pretty plain he thought different. We can’t make out yet that he was seen by anybody about the harbour, that’s true, but it is certain he took that way. You remember the turnpike between his house and St. Austin’s? Well, the pikeman swears to seeing him pass last night. He was on his dapple-grey, the same that he always rides, and even talked to the man a minute while he was waiting for his change. So there can be no mistake, you see.’

For a few seconds Haroldson did not answer. He had started violently while the captain was speaking, and now he seemed buried in earnest perplexed meditation, as one who strives to arrange his ideas after a great shock. At last he lifted his head, and said, slowly and confidently:

‘His dapple-grey, did you say? Then I can tell you what

has become of Walter Lee. It was to throw us off the scent that he went through the turnpike last night; he struck off across country before he reached St. Austin's, and now he is in hiding at North Hollsworth, in the Black Man.'

The captain stared as though he thought his friend had taken leave of his senses, and so indeed for a while he believed. But Haroldson persisted in his theory, endeavouring to convince his hearers, by recounting the circumstances of his visit to the Black Man that day, his ungracious reception by Mrs. Underwood, and, above all, the presence of a grey horse in the usually empty stable.

'I had a feeling at the time that I had seen that horse somewhere,' he concluded in rapidly increasing excitement, — 'fool that I was not to know it at once. But I know it now, it was Walter Lee's, and I'll swear to it among a thousand. Make haste, make haste, and we'll run the villain to earth yet.'

The captain still looked incredulous.

'It isn't likely the horse is the same,' he said, shaking his head. 'You've made a mistake in your reckoning, mate, depend upon it.'

'No, no, I have made no mistake,' panted Haroldson. 'Make haste, come with me to North Hollsworth, and you shall see. 'Sdeath, will you help me, or will you not?' he added with an impatient stamp of his foot.

'I'll go with you of course if you want me to. There can be no harm in trying, though, mind you, I don't believe it's a bit of use. But stop — supposing it really is as you think, isn't it as likely as not that while we are going to look for him at the Black Man, he may be riding away from us and getting off by the London road? This is just the time for him to be getting under way again, and it isn't likely he

would venture to stop another night after Mrs. Underwood caught you prowling about the stables.'

The farmer looked staggered; evidently he appreciated the force of his shrewd old friend's argument.

'Yes, yes, you are right — quite right. Somebody must go and watch by the London road, of course. I'll do that part of it, and you shall go over to the Black Man. Let me see, you must go to the village first, though, and get two or three to help — he's not a man to let himself be taken without a fight for it.'

'You are not far out there, mate. But how are you going to manage about yourself? It ain't any safer for you than for me to tackle him alone, and, what's more, you shan't try.'

Haroldson laughed savagely.

'You don't know me, or you'd know I'm a match for twenty such as he when my blood's up. No, no, don't you be frightened, Polly,' he added, as he felt his wife's hand laid imploringly on his arm, 'I'll get one of the Dobsons to go with me, or both if you like it better. I shall be safe enough, never fear.'

The Dobsons were two labourers, father and son, who lived in the cottage adjoining, and who, except during harvest-time, sufficed for the work of the farm. These, and old Mrs. Dobson who lived with them, were the only neighbours the Haroldsons had nearer than Hollsworth, half a mile distant.

'You will be sure to take them, John, won't you? Oh! promise me you will not go without them, dear John.'

'Yes, yes, I promise, keep your mind easy, Polly. Now then, let's be off if we don't want to find he has slipped through our fingers. Stop, though, I mustn't forget this.'

He stepped to the fireside, and took down an old fowling-piece from its place over the high mantel-shelf.

‘No, John, no, for Heaven’s sake no,’ entreated his wife, while once more he felt her fingers clasping his arm. ‘Put it back, dear, if you love me, do. There is no saying what may happen; you are not yourself this evening, and’

‘Do you think I’m a baby, that I’m not to be trusted with a gun? And if I were, there will be the two men to look after me, won’t there? Don’t be a fool, Polly — *he* don’t go out to-night without firearms, and I don’t see why I should either.’

‘Don’t go at all, dear, that will be the best. John, John, if you have any pity, stop at home with me and the children.’

‘What! and let that damned villain get clear off to live in clover on my money! Do you take me for an idiot? Captain, what are you waiting for? Do you your duty, and I’ll do mine.’

He shook off the loving pressure by which his arm was still retained, and, gun in hand, strode into the night air. In a moment afterwards the captain followed, having remained behind to whisper:

‘Don’t you be frightened, Mrs. Haroldson. It’s ten to one the scoundrel is half way across to Holland by this time.’

And with that the old seaman hurried out after his friend.

‘You quite understand,’ said Haroldson, who waited for him impatiently outside the threshold. ‘You are to get together a party in the village and go across with them to search the Black Man. As for the London Road, I’ll take care he don’t escape that way.’

There was something in the accent with which the last words were spoken that seemed to rouse the captain’s misgivings.

‘You will get the Dobsons to go with you, won’t you?’ he said, earnestly. ‘You must not break your promise to poor Mrs. Haroldson; you know.’

‘Who talks of breaking promises?’ replied Haroldson, testily. ‘Of course I’ll get the men to go with me, and ten men if I could. Now, if you are to do any good to-night, be off.’

The two separated without more words, the captain setting off at a brisk pace in the direction of the village, while Haroldson went towards the little cottage which stood a few yards distant from his own dwelling. He tapped hastily at the door, which was presently opened by an old woman, holding a light high above her head to discover who the unwonted visitor might be.

‘Tell Tom and Ned to come out to me at once. And hark’ee, let them bring two stout cudgels with them.’

‘My heart alive, who’d have thought of its being the master! Tom and Ned will be mortal sorry, sir, but it happens as how they are up at the village to-night, spending the evening at the Goat and Compasses. How contrairy things do fall out, to be sure! Nothing wrong I hope, sir?’

‘No, no, nothing at all. Good night.’

‘I’ll run and fetch ’em, if so be as you wish it, sir.’

‘I have no time to wait. I am in a hurry.’

He turned abruptly on his heel, and immediately afterwards had disappeared in the darkness, leaving Mrs. Dobson to direct a bewildered stare into vacancy, and then to close the door with a perplexed shake of the head.

When John Haroldson found himself alone, he paused for a moment and looked back to the place where a glow of mingled firelight and candlelight shining through a still unshuttered window marked the position of his own house.

Perhaps in that moment he was thinking of his promise to his wife; but if he was, the hesitation it caused him did not last long, for in the next he had turned his back on the light, and was striding rapidly towards the spot where, at the south-west corner of the moor, the cart-track from North Hollsworth joined the London Road.

The night sky was dark and stormy, and since sunset a high wind had sprung up which sighed and whistled about his ears with a wail almost human. But he heeded it not, and held his way steadily on, his fingers tightening themselves with feverish tenacity round the stock of his gun.

CHAPTER III.

THE DEVIL'S COAL-CELLAR.

CAPTAIN PULLYN was not a man to let grass grow under his heels, but on arriving at Hollsworth it necessarily took him some time to obtain the assistance without which his contemplated visit to the Black Man would have been alike useless and fool-hardy. Thus, with his utmost despatch, it must have been something like an hour from the time of his leaving the farm before he and a hastily organized party of some three or four stalwart villagers presented themselves at the door of the forlorn ale-house on the opposite side of the moor. Here the captain's doubts as to the correctness of Haroldson's theory were speedily strengthened, the landlord's handsome young wife assuring them that nobody was in the house save herself and her bed-ridden husband.

'If you doubt my word, you may come and look for yourselves,' she added, with a defiant toss of her dark tresses.

‘It shan’t be said I was afraid of your coming across anything wrong in my house. But you will be disappointed, that’s all I have got to tell you.’

The captain decided on entering nevertheless, and the party went into the bar-room, and thence into the kitchen. In the latter place the remains of supper stood on the table—an unusually choice one probably, judging from the chicken bones with which two plates were strewn, and a small quantity of mulled wine left still steaming in one of two tumblers.

‘Ha! so you have just had a guest at supper,’ said the captain, knitting his brows while he scanned the landlady’s face. ‘And have given him a good one too, or I am mistaken.’

She answered his frown with another, only a great deal darker.

‘I suppose I and my husband are at liberty to have what we like for supper,’ she answered haughtily. ‘This is my plate, and that is his, which I have just brought down from his bedroom. As for guests, we have not had one near us since last market-day.’

‘That is strange, for Farmer Haroldson tells me he saw a splendid dapple-grey in your stable to-day. He thought he knew it, but of course that must have been his fancy.’

He was looking at her narrowly as he spoke, and thought he detected a slight change of colour at the words. But it was difficult to decide whether it arose from the consciousness of guilt, or from simple anger at his inquisition.

‘He may have known it fifty times over for what I can tell. I didn’t, that’s all. A stranger brought it this morning, asking me to keep it till the evening, and half an hour ago he came and fetched it again. That’s the way he took, if you want to follow him.’

She pointed in the direction precisely opposite to that in which lay the London road.

‘Very obliging of you to volunteer the information, I’m sure,’ said the captain drily. ‘You are quite certain, I suppose, that the horse and his master are really gone?’

‘As you seem to doubt, you had better make sure for yourself. You are welcome to search the stable and the house too.’

‘Well, it will be a satisfaction to us, Mrs. Underwood, I don’t deny.’

She waved her hand imperiously towards the door leading into the stable-yard. Thither the captain and his companions went, but a very slight examination sufficed to show them that the horse seen by Haroldson in the afternoon was no longer there. Nor was a subsequent search for the creature’s master any more successful. As Mrs. Underwood had told them, nobody was in the house but herself and her husband—the latter too old and infirm even to comprehend the questions which Captain Pullyn did not fail to put to him. Thus, after a long search—useless except to convince them that no Walter Lee was then in hiding in or near the Black Man—the visitors took leave, making the best apology they could to Mrs. Underwood, who received it, as might have been expected, sullenly and ungraciously.

‘Who will come with me to the London road?’ asked the captain as soon as he and his comrades found themselves once more under the night sky. ‘I shan’t be satisfied till I have heard what Haroldson has been doing all this time. Not that I exactly believe in the poor fellow’s fancy, you know; but if anything could persuade me he was right, it would be that woman’s manner. It ain’t natural, my boys, and I don’t like it.’

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RAYMOND'S HEROINE.

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An's Vaterland, an's theure, schliess' dich an,
Das halte fest mit deinem ganzen Herzen!
Hier sind die starken Wurzeln deiner Kraft;
Dort in der fremden Welt stehst du allein,
Ein schwankes Rohr, das jeder Sturm zerknickt.
Schiller.

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LEIPZIG: ALPHONS DÜRR.

1867.

RAYMOND'S HEROINE.

Die angeborenen Bande knüpfte fast
An's Vaterland, an's Glück, an's Leben, nicht an,
Das hatte fast mit deinem Namen Namen
Hier sind die starken Wurzeln deiner Kraft;
Dort in der fremden Welt steht der Abgrund,
Ein schwarzes Rohr, das jeder Schritt verhängt.
Schiller.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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LEIPZIG: ALPHONS DEER.

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RAYMOND'S HEROINE.

Part I.

MINNIE.

CHAPTER I.

BLACK MOOR FARM.

A GABLE-ROOFED, lattice-windowed house, small and antique, but not the less solid and comfortable, flanked by a labourer's cottage on one side and by a range of diminutive out-houses on the other, with a tiny flower-garden in front and a dark-green background of trees rising up behind—such was Black Moor Farm five-and-twenty years ago.

A smiling place enough in itself, but unfortunate in the prospect it overlooked. For the gate at the end of the pretty flower-garden opened on a flat, dreary expanse of moorland, which only a scanty covering of grass and a few clumps of furze-bushes redeemed from utter sterility. This was the Black Moor, thus styled from that peculiar darkness of soil which tells its tale so plainly to those who have travelled through the coal districts of the North of England. A sullen, desolate waste this same Black Moor was—a place where Nature seemed to be in perpetual mourning over the buried

fertility of a ruined world. In its black eerie barrenness the plain appeared wider than it was; in reality not much more than a mile and a half can have intervened between the farm and a straggling row of deserted, half-ruined-looking cottages, which skirted the opposite or north side of the moor, and behind which rose a long low line of hills shutting in the horizon.

For any one versed in the local annals, the grimness of the scene was increased tenfold by the sight of those tenantless dwellings with their smokeless chimneys and broken windows. The Black Moor has a tragic history, and yonder empty cottages, while they stood, were ghastly mementoes of it. A coal-pit was worked here once, and those said cottages, built for the occupation of the pit-men, promised to become the nucleus of a large village, possibly of a prosperous town. But one day the miners were surprised at their work by a sudden blast of fire-damp; some scores of men who had seen the sun shining on the Black Moor that morning saw its light no more, and the cottages were left untenanted save by weeping widows and orphans, who in a few weeks were dispersed to the four winds to seek what lot might await them in the absence of their bread-winners. The abandoned homesteads were never occupied again, the damage caused by the accident being so extensive that the works were not re-opened; and the embryo village—already ambitiously dubbed North Hollsworth, after the flourishing little township of Hollsworth on the southern side of the moor—gradually fell into ruins.

Only one dwelling continued to be inhabited—a miserable ale-house, still retaining the sign of 'The Black Man,' which it had assumed in compliment to its original patrons. The landlord was an old man and averse to moving; and though

of regular customers he had now few or none, a road ran by his door along which on market-days a sufficient number of thirsty drovers journeyed to make it just worth his while to keep his house open.

The road in question skirted the northern and western sides of the moor, joining the London road near the south-west corner, not far from the place where, in hideous blackness, yawned the entrance of the disused coal-pit. As may be imagined, this spot in particular was held in evil repute by the country folk of the neighbourhood, the pit-hole being known to them by the ill-omened name of the 'Devil's Coal-cellar.' The uninhabited cottages looming on the northern horizon, spectral-looking as they were, seemed less dreary to behold than the black abyss down which human beings had descended to meet a dark, horrible death in the hidden recesses of the earth. Even grown men, finding themselves near the Devil's Coal-cellar after nightfall, were apt to pass with bated breath and accelerated pace; while, as for the children of the district, it was very rare that they ventured near the place at all save in large bands and in broad daylight. And, so far at least as the children were concerned, the superstition which taught them to eschew the spot was a very wholesome one, since a new accident might easily have happened there. The rough fence erected round the mine when the works were closed had been gradually broken down by time and weather, and had not been replaced, so that the mothers of the neighbourhood were not unnaturally wont to view the hole as a kind of ogre's trap or pitfall set expressly for the ensnarement of their darlings. However, whether by force of instinct or parental warning, the dreaded catastrophe did not occur, and, no steed having been stolen, the stable-door continued unlocked as before.

It was about three quarters of a mile from this inauspicious south-west corner that the Farm was situated, on the south side of the moor, and directly facing the deserted hamlet of North Hollsworth. Half a mile or so further on, still following the southern border of the waste, one came upon the village of Hollsworth proper, a snug, pleasant little place, peeping out from a bushy green wood, in which it seemed to be half imbedded. It was strange indeed to see how richly this cold, desolate Black Moor was fringed with verdure along the whole of its southern boundary—a juxtaposition of contrasted barrenness and fertility only to be accounted for by a similarly abrupt diversity of geological formation. Thus Black Moor Farm and the neighbouring village of Hollsworth, sketched by a spectator on the moor, would have made as pleasing a picture as an admirer of quiet rural scenery could desire; while, on the other hand, a view taken from the front windows of the farm or village would have been pronounced, if not precisely unpicturesque, certainly not smiling or pretty.

Still, sunshine and spring weather will always go some way towards lighting up the weirdest scene; and even the view over the Black Moor might almost have been called pleasant as, on a fine evening in early spring some five-and-twenty years ago, a woman stood at the gate of the pretty flower-garden in front of the farm-house, holding a little girl by the hand, while together they looked with smiling eyes over the waste. Following the direction of their gaze, there might have been descried athwart the level sunbeams two figures, a man and a child—a little girl this also—who hand in hand came towards them across the moor.

‘See, Amy dear,’ said the woman, ‘there are father and Minnie coming back at last. Poor child! I hope the walk

hasn't been too much for her, but I could not keep her at home when she begged so.'

'Amy wanted to go too,' reproachfully pouted the little one, a tiny, brown-eyed thing some four years old. 'But mother wouldn't let Amy go—not even when father said please.'

'Because Amy isn't big enough to have her own way in everything—not even when father says please,' returned the mother fondly, stooping down to stop the child's mouth with a kiss. 'Wait till you are as old as Minnie, and you shall get long enough walks then. There, run and ask Minnie how she liked it.'

She held open the gate for the child, who ran out eagerly towards the new-comers and in half a minute more was lifted high from the ground to receive a big kiss from father. Another minute, and the three—father and daughters—had reached the gate where the mother stood with beaming eyes waiting to welcome them.

'Well, John dear, so you are back at last! I hope you have not quite knocked up my little Minnie.'

'No, he hasn't,' said Minnie stoutly, 'I'm never tired when I'm with father. I am sure Amy would have been, though, wouldn't she, father? It was such a very long way, you know, and Amy is so little.'

And Minnie tossed a graceful little head over which six winters had barely passed.

Her father looked at her proudly, and began twisting a rich golden curl round one of his large sunburnt fingers.

'Did you ever see such a puss as it is?' he chuckled exultingly. 'Why, we've walked six mile if we've walked a step, and yet the monkey won't cry tired, nor wouldn't if it was twice as far. Anything to be with father, hey lass? I carried her a bit at times, so you needn't look so scared, Polly,' he added suddenly, answering a surprised glance

from his wife. 'Lord bless you, you needn't be afraid of my forgetting what the little legs are made of.'

'I am not afraid of your forgetting anything where the children are concerned, or I either,' replied the wife, smiling up fondly into his face. 'You are a good father and a good husband, John, if ever there was one.'

'I'm glad you think so, Polly, I'm glad you think so. I try to be, God knows—and with such a wife and such children as I've got, it would be hard if I didn't succeed. But take us inside, my girl, and let us have our tea. Minnie and I are starving, pretty near, ain't we little 'un?'

He drew his wife's arm within his own, and went with her towards the house, the two children bounding before them.

They were a good-looking couple, this husband and wife—he with his manly bronzed features and powerfully framed figure, she with her gentle face and graceful feminine bearing. And yet, good-looking as they were, and happy as they seemed together, a superficial observer, unaware of the perfect love which united them and smoothed down all apparent disparities, would scarcely have pronounced them a well-assorted pair. There was a refinement about the wife, both in manner and appearance, which was wanting to the husband who—partly because he could not help it, partly from mere carelessness and defiance of the world's opinion—looked and spoke a great deal more like the rough honest-hearted yeoman than like the polished gentleman that he was not.

So far it might be said that the marriage on the part of the wife was a *mésalliance*; and indeed the same had been said pretty loudly by her friends at the time it was contracted. Not that she had come of a stock much superior to his own, but her father had made a fortune in business

of which she inherited her due share; and John Haroldson when she married him was only a farmer's son, with few worldly possessions save a handsome honest face, a warm heart, and a quick temper. The last of these speedily brought him into trouble with his wife's only surviving relations, a brother and sister, who, never disposed to look on him with favour, soon found, or said they found, that there was no getting on with him. He would not brook being advised by them, and they could not, or would not keep their advice to themselves; so, as Mrs. Haroldson always took part stoutly with her husband, all communication between her and her family had been given up for years. The brother, with his ample inheritance, had betaken himself to Australia, where he was reported to be amassing a large fortune. The sister had married a wealthy merchant of St. Austin's, a large northern seaport from which Hollsworth is not more than twenty miles distant; but in spite of their comparative proximity, the two sisters, Mrs. Fanshawe and Mrs. Haroldson, lived as estranged as though half the globe had separated them.

Perhaps John Haroldson's shortcomings might have been looked upon by his wife's relations with more lenient eye if he had succeeded better than he did in worldly matters. But somehow he was not cut out to be a prosperous man. After his marriage he made an attempt to establish himself in business, but fortune, or perhaps his own idiosyncrasies declared against his success; and when the greater part of his and his wife's joint possessions had been thrown away in the vain endeavour to gain a footing in the commercial world, he gave up the task in disgust, resolving to return to his original and more congenial vocation of farming. It was at this time that Mr. and Mrs. Haroldson settled at

Black Moor Farm, which, though very small and yielding proportionately diminutive profits, suited them better than a large place would have done, especially as their income was eked out by a yearly sum arising from the remains of their former property invested at a high rate of interest in a local joint-stock company. Here their two children were born, and here, in spite of comparative poverty and almost total seclusion from the world, the happiest years of their lives were spent.

The family had now entered the house, and were assembled in the spacious front kitchen which, save on specially festive occasions, was their ordinary sitting-room, and which looked so comfortable with its sanded floor and raftered roof as fully to justify their preference.

‘Let me see, this is Captain Pullyn’s night,’ said Mrs. Haroldson, as she applied herself to the task of tea-making. ‘I always have to allow three extra spoonfuls at least when he is coming.’

‘I forgot to tell you—you need not make tea for him this evening, Polly,’ said the farmer, looking up from the corner where he was sitting with a little daughter on each knee. ‘I met him this morning, and he was going to St. Austin’s for the day and won’t be back till dark. He’ll look in then if he has time.’

Captain Pullyn was a retired master in the merchant service living at Hollsworth; and in spite—or, as the village gossips said, because—of sundry eccentricities, was the only person in the neighbourhood on anything like intimate terms at the farm, where he regularly spent two evenings of each week.

‘And what have you and Minnie been doing all this time, John?’ asked the wife, as she set a chair for her husband

at the tea-table. 'You have not told us a word yet of your adventures.'

'Well, there isn't much to tell, is there, Minnie? Except that the folks at Stockdale Farm seemed very glad to see us, and set down Minnie to a famous feast of roasted apples while I went to look at the beasts. And regular beauties they were, Polly, and no mistake.'

'Oh yes! beauties,' said Minnie, looking up from a basinful of bread and milk. 'And white sugar to eat them with, that you sprinkled on them with a spoon pricked all over holes, just like our pepper-castor. Wasn't it funny?'

'You little goose, I wasn't thinking of your apples. It was the beasts I meant, Polly, the finest lot you ever saw, and safe to be worth two hundred pound next year if they're worth a farthing, or two hundred and fifty more likely—put it down at two hundred and fifty. So I've made up my mind to bid as high as a hundred for them (we can stand that, you know), and if we get 'em—as we are pretty sure to, for there ain't anybody likely to give as much—that will make a hundred and fifty clear profit, do you see—clear profit. And then hey for another two hundred pound in the St. Austin's Grand Consolidated General Agency Company, with a silk gown for mother and the two biggest dolls in the toyshop window for my two little pussy-cats.'

'That's me,' cried Minnie, nodding her curled head rapturously—'me and Amy. But you haven't told them yet half the things we did, father. After the apples were done and father was ready, we said good-bye and went away, and presently we got into a beautiful field—oh! such a beautiful field—where there were primroses growing. Father set me down—I had been riding on father's back, you know—and we stopped a long while and gathered the biggest

nosegay I ever saw, all for mother and Amy. They would have been so pleased with it, but I was very stupid and left it behind at the Black Man.'

'The Black Man! I'm afraid you and father are not to be trusted together. What! after the roasted apples did he take you to run up a score at the Black Man?'

'And I shan't take her there again in a hurry,' said the farmer. 'They are a deal too high and mighty for my custom, to say nothing of having to wait a quarter of an hour before you can get what you want. I wouldn't have gone there, only Minnie was thirsty and wanted a drop of water, but I little knew the fuss we should have to get it.'

'Indeed, how was that?' asked his wife.

'Why, when we got to the place, after going well-nigh ten minutes out of our way for it, there didn't seem to be a soul about. We went into the bar-room, and there was nobody there, and then into the kitchen, and there was nobody there, and after that we got poking into the very stable-yard, and there was nobody there either.'

'Except a horse,' chimed in Minnie. 'We heard him neighing, and father lifted me up to peep at him through a hole in the stable-door. A pretty grey horse he was, and turned round his head quite pleased when I called to him. Wasn't he a nice old fellow, father?'

'Yes, I don't expect it's often there is a bit of horseflesh like that at the Black Man,' said the farmer. 'Well, as I was telling you, I suppose they heard our voices at last, for presently Mrs. Underwood puts her head out of an upstairs window and calls out to know what we were doing in her yard, as cross as if we were thieves. So I told her what we wanted, and when she found it was me she seemed to get a trifle more civil, and came down with a glass of water for

the child, and I had a drop of beer for the good of the house. I said we had had hard work to get anybody to hear us, and she answered, in her sulky kind of way, that she was upstairs giving her husband his dinner, and that the stable-boy had gone home for a couple of days for a holiday—nothing for him to do, she said. And they don't take the way to get much to do, either, if they don't treat their customers better than they've done to-day.'

'It isn't poor old Reuben's fault,' said Mrs. Haroldson apologetically. 'He was always civil and obliging as long as he was able to look after things himself.'

'No, it isn't poor Reuben's fault, except that he was a fool at his time of life, with one foot in the grave as you may say, to go and marry a young wife for no reason in the world but that she had got a handsome face. Any one with half an eye might have known it wouldn't turn out well.'

'It was very foolish of him of course, but, John, we have no reason yet to say that it has turned out ill.'

'Haven't we though? Look at her eye the next time you see her, and say if you think she has got the kind of temper to be happy sitting at home nursing an old bed-ridden husband. No, it would have been a deal better for her, and him too, if she had stopped behind the tobacconist's counter at St. Austin's till she got somebody of her own age to make up to her. And it would have happened some day, I don't doubt; she was a handsome girl in spite of her black looks, and there are young fools in the world as well as old ones.'

'She was very handsome certainly, and is still. And she is quite aware of it, I fancy.'

'You are about right there, Polly. Her head was turned with admiration long before she married old Reuben; he would never have had a chance of her but that she knew he

had a trifle of money laid by, and thought maybe it was more than it is. No wonder she finds the change dull when it was only last year she had half the young men of St. Austin's coming every day to look at her.'

'No wonder indeed. Poor foolish old Reuben!'

'Ay, and married ones too, if all tales are true. Why, it was even said that Mr. Lee . . . Not that I believe that part of it, you know—a practical steady-going man of business like him don't run off the course in that manner. Look here, Polly, isn't it time these young 'uns were in bed? They have had their supper, and here is Miss Amy nodding her head off already. And Miss Minnie is beginning to keep her company, I think.'

'I ain't,' said Minnie indignantly. 'Oh! do say I may stay up a little tiny bit longer, father—just till the candles come in. I'm bigger than Amy, you know.'

'So she is,' said the farmer, looking appealingly at his wife, who stood near ready to carry off both the children for execution. 'Yes, let her stay till the candles come in—it won't be long first—poor little pussy.'

Minnie rubbed her cheek gratefully on her father's rough hand as it lay on the table, and he smiled delightedly, as though well satisfied at having earned such a reward. She was his eldest-born, this pretty golden-haired little fairy, and it was tacitly understood in the household that if there was any inequality in the love which John Haroldson lavished on both his children, the scale inclined in Minnie's favour.

Amy was roused with some difficulty, and her fat little cheeks having received one pair of reverberating kisses from her father and another from Minnie, she was on the point of being led off to her solitary bed when a ring at the door-bell sounded the signal of a respite.

‘The captain, as sure as a gun,’ cried the farmer, striking his hand on the table. ‘Run, children, see who will get the door open first.’

Amy was wide awake now, and bounded after her sister towards the door, both children animated by a manifest zeal which sufficiently proved that the crusty old sea-captain had his good qualities.

The dusk was gathering fast, but there was still light enough for the children to recognise their old friend.

‘Cap’en, cap’en,’ cried little Amy, ‘come into the kitchen, cap’en, and tell mother Amy mustn’t go to bed. Amy isn’t sleepy now.’

‘What do you think, captain,’ said Minnie, ‘I have just been walking six miles. All the way to Stockdale Farm and back. Isn’t it famous?’

But the captain did not answer, and walked straight into the kitchen without a word.

Mr. Haroldson came forward to welcome him, but even then the visitor only gave a slight mechanical salutation, and, making for his accustomed place in the chimney-corner, seated himself, still in silence.

‘Hollo, what’s up now?’ said the farmer. ‘Polly, make haste and light a candle—the captain can’t see to shake hands.’

The joke did not take, for the captain remained silent some moments longer, while Mrs. Haroldson fumbled on the chimney-piece to find the matches. At last he spoke, but even the children started as they heard his voice—it was so unlike the familiar one they were used to.

‘I have just come from St. Austin’s. You haven’t heard the news yet, I suppose?’

‘News—no,’ said the farmer. ‘What kind of news?’

‘Bad. Lord help us all, very bad. Walter Lee has gone off, and carried all the ready money of the Grand Consolidated along with him. He must have been tampering with the funds for a long time back, they say. Nobody seems to know the rights of it exactly, but it comes out pretty plain that the Company’s shares ain’t worth the paper they’re printed on.’

The light of the newly-lit candle, falling on John Haroldson’s face, showed the features pale and rigid as though they had been hewn out of marble.

‘Then I am a ruined man,’ he articulated hoarsely, and, suddenly tottering, he fell back on the chair from which he had risen to greet the captain, and buried his face in his hands with the quick spasmodic movement of a strong man in his agony.

CHAPTER II.

THE DAPPLE-GREY.

FOR two or three minutes there was a stillness as of death among the little group.

Mrs. Haroldson, pale and trembling, sat looking at her husband without strength to speak to him a word of comfort; and the two little girls, vaguely understanding that a great calamity had fallen upon the household crept up to her side in mute awe-struck wonderment. At last the captain broke silence.

‘Come, mate,’ he said kindly, clapping his broad palm on Haroldson’s shoulder, ‘you mustn’t take on like this. Think of your wife and children, and bear up for their sakes if you can’t for your own.’

A convulsive quiver shook the farmer's burly frame from head to foot; it was precisely because he did think of his wife and children that the blow had fallen upon him so heavily.

'Yes, yes, it's very hard, I know, but you must keep your colours flying for all that. Only look what a young man you are compared to me, and every penny I've got, pretty nigh, is gone the same way. Little I thought ever to go afloat again, I promise you, but I must now. And there's my boy Joe whom I'd set my heart on bringing up for a gentleman and a scholar—and he's got the stuff for it in him if ever a little chap had—he must go to a cheaper school now, or p'raps none at all. It's a bad job, for the masters are so pleased with him, and eleven's just the age when a boy takes in most. But I keep up my spirits, bless you, I keep up my spirits—there's something tells me Joe will make port yet.'

And the captain gave vent to a sound that was intended for a great cheery guffaw, but which a curious obstruction in his throat turned into something not unlike a sob.

'We ain't the only ones, nor yet the worst off,' he went on after a pause. 'I'm sorry for Mrs. Haroldson there, but how would she like to change with poor Mrs. Lee, who has been lying all day half dead, moaning and groaning after the rascally scoundrelly villain that has deserted her? And there's poor young Raymond Lee, the son, reading for honours at Oxford, where I'd meant to send Joe too when the time came—how would you like to be him when he hears that his father is a blackguard and a thief, whom the gallows would be too good for? A fine young fellow he is as ever stepped; I always took to him from the time he had that stand-up fight at school three years ago for little Joe. It isn't every big boy ready to leave school who would

trouble himself about a little 'un just come in; but there were a couple of great hulking chaps trying to put upon Joe and chaffing him because, mayhap, his father wasn't such a fine gentleman as theirs, and young Lee told them to have done, and they wouldn't, and with that he fought them and gave them such a devil of a thrashing as I'll be bound their timbers show the marks of to this day. A fine fellow—a magnificent fellow. And to think of him having such a father!'

Haroldson made a movement of impatience; wrath at last supplied him with speech.

'Curse the father and the son too!' he burst out. 'Curse them—curse them ten times over for what they have made me and mine suffer.'

'This won't do, mate, 'pon my word it won't do. Better leave the cursing alone altogether in my opinion, but anyhow you mustn't mix up the innocent and the guilty. Come, come, things are bad enough without making 'em worse, and if you work yourself into a passion like this you'll break your poor wife's heart, and you know you will.'

The argument thus used, and perhaps a certain accent of authority audible in the captain's voice, did not pass without effect. Haroldson seemed to make a violent effort at self-control, and having muttered a few words fiercely to himself, relapsed into silence. Presently, with a new effort, he spoke again—this time in tones weak and husky, but constrainedly calm.

'You have told me nothing yet. How did it all happen? Why didn't they stop him?'

'I suppose because he was too sharp for them, the scoundrel. It seems, though, the directors have been getting a little suspicious lately; but instead of grappling him at once,

they fussed and palavered, and talked about getting an assistant-secretary to help him with his work, and in one way or another gave him time to get frightened. Well, things went on so a good while, and at last an assistant-secretary was engaged, and was to come into the office this very day, and there was to be a meeting of the Board, and a grand overhauling of the books, and I don't know what. It was all very cleverly arranged, I dare say, but you see Lee was one too many for them, and when the office was opened this morning he never showed face in it. They sent to his house three mile out of town to see what the matter was, and found Mrs. Lee in a terrible state, for he had gone out the evening before to visit a friend and hadn't been home since; she was afraid some harm had come to him—though, poor soul, she didn't guess what. They searched and searched, but couldn't get to hear anything of him, and at last somebody thought of breaking open the desk where he kept his papers. And sure enough the first thing they found was a letter directed to Mrs. Lee, bidding her good-bye before he was off across the sea, and begging her to forgive him, for the devil had got hold of him and he couldn't help himself. With that poor Mrs. Lee fainted right off, and has never properly come to herself since, and the Company's people went back to the office to see after the books and the strong-box. They were not long of finding out then that he had gone off with everything that could be taken, and had been cheating them with false accounts for years back into the bargain. The Grand Consolidated has been a humbug all along, but there is one person will have made a good thing out of it, and that's Walter Lee.'

'He shan't,' cried Haroldson fiercely, while his face, so pale a minute before, suddenly flushed purple with passion.

‘Who is he that he is not to be caught and punished like other robbers? It will be easy enough to lay hands on him; he can’t be far off yet.’

‘I don’t know about that—it is just the contrary, I’m afraid. A vessel put out of St. Austin’s this morning for Rotterdam, and it’s as certain well-nigh as anything can be that Walter Lee was aboard of her.’

The farmer’s countenance fell, and for a moment he was silent. Presently he seemed to recover himself, and shouted vehemently:

‘I don’t believe a word of it. What! do you mean to tell me that the people at the harbour, where he is so well known, would be such fools as to let him go out of the country without scenting something wrong, or do you think for that matter he would be such a fool as to make the venture? He would try every port in England before St. Austin’s, I can tell you.’

‘So I should have said too,’ answered the captain, ‘but it seems pretty plain he thought different. We can’t make out yet that he was seen by anybody about the harbour, that’s true, but it is certain he took that way. You remember the turnpike between his house and St. Austin’s? Well, the pikeman swears to seeing him pass last night. He was on his dapple-grey, the same that he always rides, and even talked to the man a minute while he was waiting for his change. So there can be no mistake, you see.’

For a few seconds Haroldson did not answer. He had started violently while the captain was speaking, and now he seemed buried in earnest perplexed meditation, as one who strives to arrange his ideas after a great shock. At last he lifted his head, and said, slowly and confidently:

‘His dapple-grey, did you say? Then I can tell you what

has become of Walter Lee. It was to throw us off the scent that he went through the turnpike last night; he struck off across country before he reached St. Austin's, and now he is in hiding at North Hollsworth, in the Black Man.'

The captain stared as though he thought his friend had taken leave of his senses, and so indeed for a while he believed. But Haroldson persisted in his theory, endeavouring to convince his hearers, by recounting the circumstances of his visit to the Black Man that day, his ungracious reception by Mrs. Underwood, and, above all, the presence of a grey horse in the usually empty stable.

'I had a feeling at the time that I had seen that horse somewhere,' he concluded in rapidly increasing excitement, — 'fool that I was not to know it at once. But I know it now, it was Walter Lee's, and I'll swear to it among a thousand. Make haste, make haste, and we'll run the villain to earth yet.'

The captain still looked incredulous.

'It isn't likely the horse is the same,' he said, shaking his head. 'You've made a mistake in your reckoning, mate, depend upon it.'

'No, no, I have made no mistake,' panted Haroldson. 'Make haste, come with me to North Hollsworth, and you shall see. 'Sdeath, will you help me, or will you not?' he added with an impatient stamp of his foot.

'I'll go with you of course if you want me to. There can be no harm in trying, though, mind you, I don't believe it's a bit of use. But stop — supposing it really is as you think, isn't it as likely as not that while we are going to look for him at the Black Man, he may be riding away from us and getting off by the London road? This is just the time for him to be getting under way again, and it isn't likely he

would venture to stop another night after Mrs. Underwood caught you prowling about the stables.'

The farmer looked staggered; evidently he appreciated the force of his shrewd old friend's argument.

'Yes, yes, you are right — quite right. Somebody must go and watch by the London road, of course. I'll do that part of it, and you shall go over to the Black Man. Let me see, you must go to the village first, though, and get two or three to help — he's not a man to let himself be taken without a fight for it.'

'You are not far out there, mate. But how are you going to manage about yourself? It ain't any safer for you than for me to tackle him alone, and, what's more, you shan't try.'

Haroldson laughed savagely.

'You don't know me, or you'd know I'm a match for twenty such as he when my blood's up. No, no, don't you be frightened, Polly,' he added, as he felt his wife's hand laid imploringly on his arm, 'I'll get one of the Dobsons to go with me, or both if you like it better. I shall be safe enough, never fear.'

The Dobsons were two labourers, father and son, who lived in the cottage adjoining, and who, except during harvest-time, sufficed for the work of the farm. These, and old Mrs. Dobson who lived with them, were the only neighbours the Haroldsons had nearer than Hollsworth, half a mile distant.

'You will be sure to take them, John, won't you? Oh! promise me you will not go without them, dear John.'

'Yes, yes, I promise, keep your mind easy, Polly. Now then, let's be off if we don't want to find he has slipped through our fingers. Stop, though, I mustn't forget this.'

He stepped to the fireside, and took down an old fowling-piece from its place over the high mantel-shelf.

‘No, John, no, for Heaven’s sake no,’ entreated his wife, while once more he felt her fingers clasping his arm. ‘Put it back, dear, if you love me, do. There is no saying what may happen; you are not yourself this evening, and’

‘Do you think I’m a baby, that I’m not to be trusted with a gun? And if I were, there will be the two men to look after me, won’t there? Don’t be a fool, Polly — *he* don’t go out to-night without firearms, and I don’t see why I should either.’

‘Don’t go at all, dear, that will be the best. John, John, if you have any pity, stop at home with me and the children.’

‘What! and let that damned villain get clear off to live in clover on my money! Do you take me for an idiot? Captain, what are you waiting for? Do you your duty, and I’ll do mine.’

He shook off the loving pressure by which his arm was still retained, and, gun in hand, strode into the night air. In a moment afterwards the captain followed, having remained behind to whisper:

‘Don’t you be frightened, Mrs. Haroldson. It’s ten to one the scoundrel is half way across to Holland by this time.’

And with that the old seaman hurried out after his friend.

‘You quite understand,’ said Haroldson, who waited for him impatiently outside the threshold. ‘You are to get together a party in the village and go across with them to search the Black Man. As for the London Road, I’ll take care he don’t escape that way.’

There was something in the accent with which the last words were spoken that seemed to rouse the captain’s misgivings.

‘You will get the Dobsons to go with you, won’t you?’ he said, earnestly. ‘You must not break your promise to poor Mrs. Haroldson; you know.’

‘Who talks of breaking promises?’ replied Haroldson, testily. ‘Of course I’ll get the men to go with me, and ten men if I could. Now, if you are to do any good to-night, be off.’

The two separated without more words, the captain setting off at a brisk pace in the direction of the village, while Haroldson went towards the little cottage which stood a few yards distant from his own dwelling. He tapped hastily at the door, which was presently opened by an old woman, holding a light high above her head to discover who the unwonted visitor might be.

‘Tell Tom and Ned to come out to me at once. And hark’ee, let them bring two stout cudgels with them.’

‘My heart alive, who’d have thought of its being the master! Tom and Ned will be mortal sorry, sir, but it happens as how they are up at the village to-night, spending the evening at the Goat and Compasses. How contrary things do fall out, to be sure! Nothing wrong I hope, sir?’

‘No, no, nothing at all. Good night.’

‘I’ll run and fetch ’em, if so be as you wish it, sir.’

‘I have no time to wait. I am in a hurry.’

He turned abruptly on his heel, and immediately afterwards had disappeared in the darkness, leaving Mrs. Dobson to direct a bewildered stare into vacancy, and then to close the door with a perplexed shake of the head.

When John Haroldson found himself alone, he paused for a moment and looked back to the place where a glow of mingled firelight and candlelight shining through a still unshuttered window marked the position of his own house.

Perhaps in that moment he was thinking of his promise to his wife; but if he was, the hesitation it caused him did not last long, for in the next he had turned his back on the light, and was striding rapidly towards the spot where, at the south-west corner of the moor, the cart-track from North Hollsworth joined the London Road.

The night sky was dark and stormy, and since sunset a high wind had sprung up which sighed and whistled about his ears with a wail almost human. But he heeded it not, and held his way steadily on, his fingers tightening themselves with feverish tenacity round the stock of his gun.

CHAPTER III.

THE DEVIL'S COAL-CELLAR.

CAPTAIN PULLYN was not a man to let grass grow under his heels, but on arriving at Hollsworth it necessarily took him some time to obtain the assistance without which his contemplated visit to the Black Man would have been alike useless and fool-hardy. Thus, with his utmost despatch, it must have been something like an hour from the time of his leaving the farm before he and a hastily organized party of some three or four stalwart villagers presented themselves at the door of the forlorn ale-house on the opposite side of the moor. Here the captain's doubts as to the correctness of Haroldson's theory were speedily strengthened, the landlord's handsome young wife assuring them that nobody was in the house save herself and her bed-ridden husband.

'If you doubt my word, you may come and look for yourselves,' she added, with a defiant toss of her dark tresses.

‘It shan’t be said I was afraid of your coming across anything wrong in my house. But you will be disappointed, that’s all I have got to tell you.’

The captain decided on entering nevertheless, and the party went into the bar-room, and thence into the kitchen. In the latter place the remains of supper stood on the table—an unusually choice one probably, judging from the chicken bones with which two plates were strewn, and a small quantity of mulled wine left still steaming in one of two tumblers.

‘Ha! so you have just had a guest at supper,’ said the captain, knitting his brows while he scanned the landlady’s face. ‘And have given him a good one too, or I am mistaken.’

She answered his frown with another, only a great deal darker.

‘I suppose I and my husband are at liberty to have what we like for supper,’ she answered haughtily. ‘This is my plate, and that is his, which I have just brought down from his bedroom. As for guests, we have not had one near us since last market-day.’

‘That is strange, for Farmer Haroldson tells me he saw a splendid dapple-grey in your stable to-day. He thought he knew it, but of course that must have been his fancy.’

He was looking at her narrowly as he spoke, and thought he detected a slight change of colour at the words. But it was difficult to decide whether it arose from the consciousness of guilt, or from simple anger at his inquisition.

‘He may have known it fifty times over for what I can tell. I didn’t, that’s all. A stranger brought it this morning, asking me to keep it till the evening, and half an hour ago he came and fetched it again. That’s the way he took, if you want to follow him.’

She pointed in the direction precisely opposite to that in which lay the London road.

‘Very obliging of you to volunteer the information, I’m sure,’ said the captain drily. ‘You are quite certain, I suppose, that the horse and his master are really gone?’

‘As you seem to doubt, you had better make sure for yourself. You are welcome to search the stable and the house too.’

‘Well, it will be a satisfaction to us, Mrs. Underwood, I don’t deny.’

She waved her hand imperiously towards the door leading into the stable-yard. Thither the captain and his companions went, but a very slight examination sufficed to show them that the horse seen by Haroldson in the afternoon was no longer there. Nor was a subsequent search for the creature’s master any more successful. As Mrs. Underwood had told them, nobody was in the house but herself and her husband—the latter too old and infirm even to comprehend the questions which Captain Pullyn did not fail to put to him. Thus, after a long search—useless except to convince them that no Walter Lee was then in hiding in or near the Black Man—the visitors took leave, making the best apology they could to Mrs. Underwood, who received it, as might have been expected, sullenly and ungraciously.

‘Who will come with me to the London road?’ asked the captain as soon as he and his comrades found themselves once more under the night sky. ‘I shan’t be satisfied till I have heard what Haroldson has been doing all this time. Not that I exactly believe in the poor fellow’s fancy, you know; but if anything could persuade me he was right, it would be that woman’s manner. It ain’t natural, my boys, and I don’t like it.’

Partly out of a real wish to be of service, partly out of curiosity and love of excitement, all signified their willingness to see the adventure to a conclusion; and, striking across the plain in a southwesterly direction, the party set out for their night walk over the Black Moor.

A wild rough walk it was for a stormy night—over uneven ground where ever and anon large bristling clumps of furze presented themselves, not always easy to avoid stumbling against in the darkness. There might have been some danger of the captain and his companions losing their way, but that it was from time to time shown them by the light of the moon, which had now risen, and every now and then was to be seen through an occasional rent in the dark masses of cloud that careered over the sky. The wind was still very high, and howled about the ears of the wayfarers with grotesque variety of note—sometimes as though endeavouring fantastically to imitate the cry of a living thing in pain. They pushed on resolutely, however, in spite of the difficulties of the way, only at last slackening their pace when the foremost of the party turned round to say warningly:

‘For the Lord’s sake look well to your footing. We are close on the Devil’s Coal-Cellar here—I know it by these bushes.’

‘So we are,’ said another, stopping to look round him, ‘Well, it’s an ugly place to be near, especially on a night like this. Save us! what a noise the wind makes!’

‘The wind—or something else,’ said the first, with a shudder. ‘For my part, I’m never this way but I fancy I hear some queer noise or other. Lord be good to us, what was that?’

‘A kind of sob or groan, wasn’t it?’ tremulously whispered

his comrade. 'And right aneath our feet it sounded, too. But somehow it wasn't like a man's voice altogether.'

'A man!—who said it was a man? A man at the bottom of the Devil's Coal-Cellar! No, it was no man—no man of flesh and blood like you and me, that is.'

'What confounded nonsense are you two lubbers jabbering about?' testily interposed the captain. 'Did you never hear the wind howl before, that you hold such a parley over it? Lead on, and don't make jackasses of yonrselves.'

The party proceeded a few paces, and then came to a halt again.

They had passed the bushes which an instant ago had concealed from them the mouth of the pit, and now found themselves skirting its very brink. Instinctively they paused on their way to look and listen, unconsciously fascinated by the sinister horror of the time and the place. At this moment the moon was completely hidden, and the abyss at their feet was to be divined rather than seen—its locality being marked only by a blackness more intense than that prevailing elsewhere, and its limits defined by the dark outline of the bushes which here and there had sprung up on its opposite margin. But for a spectator who knew what lay between him and those bushes, the mystery which night hung over the spot rendered it not the less grim and gruesome.

'It must have been the wind,' whispered one of the two men who had spoken before. 'All's quiet enough now, anyhow.'

'Of course it was the wind,' said the captain, gruffly, 'who thought it was anything else? Now get on, boys—we shall be within hail of the road in another minute.'

They walked on, soon leaving the pit-hole behind them, and presently a flood of moonlight bursting from behind a black cloud showed them, not fifty yards in front, the sign-post marking the spot where the London road touched the corner of the moor. This was the place where Haroldson was to have kept watch, but, to the captain's surprise, it appeared entirely deserted.

'It's an odd thing,' he said, as he quickened his pace. 'I made sure he would have waited till he heard what we had been doing.'

Just then one of the party, happening to turn his head, uttered an exclamation of surprise which arrested the captain in his course.

'There's somebody standing up near the pit-hole, sir. What do you think it can be?'

All looked round. A figure, distinctly visible in the moonlight, stood at the mouth of the pit, bending downwards, almost as though seeking to explore the depths below.

The captain shouted a stentorian 'Ahoy;' the figure raised its head with a sudden start, looking round in seeming bewilderment; then, on a second summons, came away from the pit-hole and began slowly to approach. As it drew near, the captain, with a sense of relief which he would hardly have cared to admit, recognized the athletic form of his friend Haroldson.

'Why the devil couldn't you say it was you at once?' he asked rather roughly. 'I declare I didn't know what to think. Well, you have had no luck, I suppose, any more than we have? There's nobody been by your way, eh?'

The farmer shook his head slowly; then, opening his mouth with an apparent effort, brought out the word:

'Nobody.'

His voice sounded so hoarse and tremulous that the captain could not repress a feeling of anxiety on his behalf.

‘Cheer up, old friend, what ’s the good of crying over spilt milk? Here’s what comes of being alone, you see—you’ve been moping yourself into the dismal, and there has been nobody to talk you out of them. Why didn’t you take the Dobsons with you?’

‘It was not my fault—I tried to get them—indeed I did. God knows that everything has been against me.’

He put his hand up to his forehead with a wildness of gesture which increased the captain’s solicitude.

‘You mustn’t take on like this about a lot of yellow metal-shavings, ’pon my soul you mustn’t. What’s money but dross after all, as the parson says on Sundays? And as for not getting law of the fellow, there’s no use in fretting about that. He ’s a bad ’un, and must come to a bad end, without you to help him.’

‘That’s true,’ cried Haroldson eagerly, that ’s true. Say that again.’

‘Not if you put yourself in such a heat about it. But folks like him generally get what they deserve sooner or later, if that’s any comfort to you.’

‘And he has deserved the worst,’ insisted Haroldson, feverishly. ‘The very worst—eh?’

‘Yes, yes, quite as bad as he ’s likely to get, at all events. But come home, and let your poor wife see you are safe—she’ll care more about that than the money, whatever you do.’

He laid his hand on Haroldson’s arm to lead him away. All strength seemed to have departed from the farmer’s vigorous frame, and he gave himself up to the captain’s will with almost childlike submission.

The party now directed their steps towards the farmhouse. On drawing near, they found themselves waited for by Mrs. Haroldson, who stood watching at the garden-gate.

‘All right,’ cried the captain cheerily as soon as he was near enough to be heard. ‘We haven’t run down the villain, but we’ve come back to port safe and sound ourselves, and that’s something to say.’

She came out to meet them with hands clasped fervently in gratitude.

‘Thank God for that. Oh! John, if you knew what I have been suffering since you left me! When I heard the gun, I thought I must have died.’

‘A gun!’ cried the captain in amazement. ‘I heard no gun, but to be sure, I haven’t been sitting quiet all evening as you have. Did you hear anything, Jack? it must have been more your way than ours.’

The farmer looked up with a vacant, bewildered expression which more than ever increased his friend’s concern; then glanced towards the piece he held in his hand, as though with difficulty collecting his ideas.

‘No,’ he answered at length. ‘At least—yes—that is—I think I heard something in the woods—a great way off. It must have been poachers.’

‘A yes! of course,’ said the captain. ‘Pity they made Mrs. Haroldson so nervous. Hollo, mate, what’s the matter?’

‘I am giddy,’ whispered Haroldson, while he clutched his friend’s arm for support. ‘Take me into the house.’

Captain Pullyn paused an instant to dismiss his escort of villagers, who were ready enough to go home now that all chance of adventure was at an end; then, drawing the farmer’s arm through his own, led him into the kitchen. Here

the unfortunate man, pale and haggard, dropped into a chair, looking so much the ghost of what he had been two hours before, that both the rough seaman and the tender wife were thoroughly alarmed.

‘Run and get him a drop of brandy, Mrs. Haroldson. Come, man, cheer up and look alive, if it’s only for the sake of these two pretty little ones.’

He pointed to Minnie and Amy, who were coming softly up to look at father, creeping along almost as timidly as if he had been a stranger. Their mother had had no heart to put them to bed during her husband’s absence, and with a big picture-book spread before them they had been allowed to sit up, half dozing, in their favourite corner, whence they now emerged, looking quite cowed, as indeed they were, by the strangeness of the hour, and a vague sense of the presence of disaster.

‘Come along, my hearties,’ said the captain coaxingly, ‘come and give father a kiss, and tell him he’ll live to see fair weather yet.’

Thus encouraged, the children approached less shyly, and Minnie was endeavouring to hoist herself up on her father’s knee, when she was arrested by a sudden cry of alarm from her mother. The child’s dress had caught in the lock of the gun which stood upright against John Haroldson’s chair.

‘The gun, the gun!’ exclaimed Mrs. Haroldson, drawing away the child almost with a shriek. ‘For mercy’s sake take care; it is loaded.’

Her husband had been leaning back in his chair with closed eyes, but he opened them at this and said ‘No,’ then paused abruptly.

‘Not loaded? I thought you always kept it loaded.’

‘Not—not this time,’ said the farmer faintly.

‘If I had only known!’ sighed Mrs. Haroldson—‘how much anxiety I should have been spared to-night! Oh! John, forgive me, but I was so afraid you might do something rash—something you might spend the rest of your life in repenting.’

‘The brandy, for God’s sake!’ interposed the captain. He was standing close by Haroldson’s side, and could note every change that passed over the almost ghastly countenance.

The affrighted wife rushed to the table, and seized the glass she had already filled. But ere she could raise it to her husband’s lips, his head fell heavily backwards, his face flushed, his teeth clenched, and he began breathing quickly and convulsively. It was evident that the case was one calling for other than ordinary household remedies, and Captain Pullyn set off at his quickest rate of speed to fetch the doctor from Hollsworth.

Before midnight John Haroldson had been carried to bed, pronounced to be suffering from a severe attack of congestion of the brain.

CHAPTER IV.

A RICH RELATION.

TWO months passed away, and the farmer, though out of danger, had not yet left his sick-bed. During this time he had been ill almost to death, his life being despaired of for weeks together; and even now that he had begun to recover, he was so worn and reduced by sickness as to be for the present but the shadow of his former self.

Two terrible months these had been for Mary Haroldson,

who, in addition to the overwhelming anxiety caused by her husband's illness, had been harassed by prospects of impending ruin and beggary. The accounts of the St. Austin's Grand Consolidated General Agency Company had been undergoing examination meanwhile, and matters were discovered to have been so managed that the shareholders would not only lose every shilling of their paid-up capital, but were further liable for heavy debts contracted in their name. Unsuspected by any one but the defaulting secretary, Walter Lee, the affairs of the Company had been going wrong for years, and what wrecks of its property had survived imprudent or dishonest administration he had carried off with him in his flight. Of recovering the money thus stolen, or any portion of it, there did not now appear to be the slightest chance. In spite of the most strenuous efforts, nothing had been discovered throwing any light on the mystery which had from the first shrouded the movements of the fugitive, except indeed in so far as suspicions of Mrs. Underwood's complicity in his flight might have been confirmed by her disappearance a week or two afterwards.

But in the midst of all the obscurity and confusion, one fact came out quite clearly even to the perplexed comprehension of poor care-laden Mary Haroldson; and this was that such of the shareholders as could not afford to pay the calls made on them must be sold up and ruined, and among them the tenants of Black Moor Farm.

There was no friend near her to whom to apply for assistance in her straits. Captain Pullyn, who alone of all her neighbours would have been willing to make substantial sacrifices to befriend her and her family, was a fellow-victim with her husband in the Company's ruin, and was at this time in the thick of his own troubles. So the poor woman,

with her husband lying in hourly danger of death, and an execution for debt staring her in the face, had written to the rich Mrs. Fanshawe of St. Austin's, who had no children of her own to provide for, and from whose abundance a trifle for the relief of a sister's family would never be missed.

To this appeal, wrung from the despair of a wife and mother's heart, Mrs. Fanshawe had not been altogether deaf. She had driven over from St. Austin's one day in her grand carriage, and spent nearly an hour in hearing the tale of her sister's sorrows. She had shaken her head over John Haroldson's speculative rashness, and declared that she had foreseen some such catastrophe for him all along. She had listened patiently to Mrs. Haroldson's calculations of what would suffice to save the family from absolute beggary—the advance of a couple of hundreds for the purpose of buying in the furniture and paying a year's rent on the farm; and had graciously nodded approval at the declaration that, in the event of such a loan being made, a sum should be regularly laid by each quarter for its repayment in five years at furthest. She had patted the children on the head and asked them their ages, pronouncing Amy a funny little old-fashioned thing, and professing to find in Minnie a striking resemblance to herself. She had even carried her condescension towards the latter so far as to ask the child how she would like to go and see her at St. Austin's. She had told her sister she was very sorry for her misfortunes and hoped soon to hear a better account. And finally she had discovered that there was positively not another moment to spare, and had got into her grand carriage again, leaving a five-pound note behind her.

Nearly a fortnight had now passed since the rich lady's

visit, and nothing more had been heard of her at the farm. In the meantime, however, Mrs. Haroldson had been relieved of her heaviest care by the decided amendment of her husband, who, as has been said, was now pronounced out of danger. But what a difference his sufferings had wrought in him!—such a difference that even the particulars of his wife's application to Mrs. Fanshawe and its results scarcely sufficed to move him to indignation. Between his illness and his misfortunes his spirit appeared to be utterly crushed and broken; he lay in a state of chronic listlessness and dejection from which nothing had power to rouse him, save indeed sometimes the prattle of his little Minnie. For the child, so dear to him always, seemed dearer than ever now that dark days had come upon him.

One afternoon about this time Mrs. Haroldson was in her kitchen preparing her husband's dinner, and drearily wondering how many more dinners were to be prepared for him in that familiar home where the brightest period of their lives (alas! how quickly it had retreated into the past!) had been spent.

With the gradual subsidence of her fear for her husband's safety grew stronger and stronger that other fear as to how they should bear the poverty and destitution which, as she could not forget, daily threatened them nearer. The wolf was at the door, and now that she had given up all hope of substantial aid from her sister she saw not how he could be kept out. She thought of her children, who in happy carelessness of the future were playing beside her, and sighed heavily, when suddenly the sound of wheels drawing up in front of the house caused her to look round. And then her heart gave a bound of hope, for a stylish carriage which she recognised stood outside the garden-gate, while a lady

whom she knew was being helped to descend by a powdered and liveried footman.

The lady was Mrs. Fanshawe, her sister.

Mrs. Fanshawe was a tall, dignified-looking woman, a good deal older than her sister—she was at this time about forty years of age—with a fine figure, and a face which could still lay claim to being a handsome one. That is to say, the complexion was fresh and well-preserved, and the features correctly cast after the best models, for there was not mind enough in the face to stamp it with any distinctive character of its own. As Mrs. Fanshawe had herself observed, there was a certain resemblance between herself and little Minnie Haroldson, but it was a superficial resemblance at best. Her clear blue eyes were of a paler and colder hue than those of the child, and her hair could only have been called golden by flattery, lacking as it did the rich lustre which glanced from Minnie's curls. Still there was a real likeness between aunt and niece so long as the countenances of both were in repose, but when the child smiled or grew animated it disappeared at once. And it happened very often that Minnie grew animated.

Minnie was sitting at the table snipping up pieces of old calico under the impression that she was cutting out a dress for her doll, and the visitor paused to stroke her head before taking the chair which Mrs. Haroldson hastened to bring forward.

'She looks very well to-day,' said Mrs. Fanshawe admiringly. 'You know me again, my dear, do you not?'

'Oh yes!' answered Minnie frankly. 'You are Aunt Fanshawe, and you said that some day I was to go and see you at St. Austin's.'

‘Did I, my dear? Well, you will like it very much, won’t you?’

‘When father is better,’ said Minnie, nodding her head. ‘But father isn’t well enough to take me yet.’

‘Oh indeed!’ said Mrs. Fanshawe drily. She paused, and then added: ‘I have something to say to your mamma, my dear. Will you go and play in the next room for a few minutes, and take your sister with you?’

‘Go, my darlings,’ said Mrs. Haroldson; and, with all the authority of her riper years, Minnie took possession of Amy, and the two marched off together.

The visitor seated herself, and then, having waited till the children had closed the door behind them, began:

‘Mary, I have taken a great fancy to your eldest little girl. What do you think of my arranging to adopt her?’

The mother grew suddenly pale.

‘To adopt her! To — to take her away with you do you mean?’

‘When I speak of adopting her I can mean nothing else. Of course she would live under my roof.’

‘No, no,’ cried Mrs. Haroldson hastily. ‘Oh! Leonora, don’t be angry with me, but I could not think of parting with her for a moment. It would break my heart.’

‘You must consider the subject well before you decide,’ said Mrs. Fanshawe, not a whit discouraged. ‘This offer is one which will take a great burden off your hands, and’ . . .

‘A burden! Minnie a burden! Oh! if you knew’ . . .

‘What it is to be a mother,’ poor Mrs. Haroldson was going to add, but she checked herself in time.

‘I know very well what I am saying,’ said Mrs. Fanshawe, with frigid stateliness. ‘Whatever Minnie may be to you,

she is not to be maintained and educated for nothing, I suppose, any more than other children. But that is not all I was going to say. You were speaking the other day of two or three hundreds being needed to pay your rent and buy in your furniture. Now I should consider it part of the arrangement that you should have whatever you wanted for the purpose — if you agree to my proposal, that is, you understand.'

Mrs. Haroldson quite understood, but she shook her head nevertheless.

'It is very kind of you, and I am very grateful,' she said humbly. 'But I could not part with her — indeed, indeed, I could not. It would be like selling her for gold,' she added with a shudder.

Mrs. Fanshawe drew herself up stiffly.

'One would think you imagined that I wanted the child to make a slave of. I tell you that I propose to adopt her — to treat her in all respects as if she were my own; to forget in fact that she is anything else. She would be educated and brought up precisely as a daughter of my own would have been educated and brought up; she would be introduced into society when she is old enough, as Miss Fanshawe, and she would inherit all we have to leave. I have been consulting Mr. Fanshawe on the subject, and I have his entire sanction.'

'In this as in all other matters,' she might have added, for Mr. Fanshawe was a husband who was never known to refuse his wife anything. Not that he was particularly uxorious; but, except where the making of money was concerned, he was lazy and apathetic, and cared for nothing enough to make a fuss about it.

‘If you like to throw away all these advantages for your child, of course there is nothing to be said,’ went on Mrs. Fanshawe, ‘but for my part I do not understand how you will be able to reconcile yourself to a course so culpably selfish.’

A course so culpably selfish! the big words sounded very dreadful in the mother’s ears. She was silent for a while; she had decided to keep her child, and was endeavouring to justify the decision to her conscience. To be accused of culpable selfishness where Minnie was concerned was very terrible, but then the idea of parting with her was more terrible still.

Mrs. Fanshawe thought she had triumphed, and proceeded to her final stipulation.

‘There is nothing in such matters like a thorough preliminary explanation,’ she said, coughing with an air of slight embarrassment behind her delicately-gloved hand, ‘and there is one more point on which I should wish to have a very clear understanding. If I consent to undertake such responsibilities towards the child, it can only be on the condition that she shall be altogether mine, and that no other influence than mine shall be brought to bear on her. I have suffered too much from your husband’s rudeness and presumption not to know what it would be if he had any pretext for interfering in my domestic concerns. Therefore you will understand that, if you give up the child to me, there must be an end of all communication between her and her former home. She will be my daughter, and, as your husband’s conduct has made all intercourse between his family and mine impossible, you and he must both be contented never to see her.’

‘Never to see Minnie! the idea is absurd — outrageous,’

and the mother almost laughed in the defiant bitterness of her spirit.

Mrs. Fanshawe gathered her shawl round her with a look of deeply offended dignity.

'I had hardly expected this. You write to ask me for help; and, when I come to give it you, I am told that my proposals are absurd. Well, I am glad that I have at least amused you, though I could have wished to serve you more substantially.'

She was rising to go, when her sister laid a trembling hand on her sleeve.

'Leonora, dear Leonora, don't go away. I was very wrong to speak so, but I was not myself for the moment. There is nothing else in the world that I would not do to please you, only it would kill me to give up my child. You will forgive me, and help me, won't you?'

'I should be very glad to help you, Mary, but it appears you will not allow me to do so.'

'Any way but that — any way but that. I could not bear it, you know, and you would not wish me to die. And there is her father too — he would never consent — I am sure he would not.'

'Her father knows what he is about a great deal too well to refuse,' rejoined the visitor confidently. 'I have no great opinion of John Haroldson, but I do not give him credit for either such blindness or such selfishness as you seem to attribute to him. But of course if his consent is not asked it will not be given — I quite agree with you in that.'

'I will ask him if you wish it,' sobbed Mrs. Haroldson, terrified at her sister's offended tone. 'But I know he will not consent — I am afraid it will make him ill again even to think of it.'

‘I am of a different opinion. However, if you do not choose to consult him, it is of no consequence — none to me at least.’

In her anxiety not to alienate the only person from whom help was possible, Mrs. Haroldson made the concession which seemed to be expected of her, and undertook at once to inform her husband of the proffered terms.

‘But you must not be angry if he refuses,’ she added tearfully as she left the room. ‘For he will, I know he will.’

As might have been expected, Mrs. Haroldson had estimated her husband’s character more correctly than her sister. When the farmer was told that Mrs. Fanshawe was willing to help him on condition of being allowed to take possession of little Minnie, he fell into such a fit of rage as made it difficult to recognize the lethargic invalid of a few moments before.

‘The vile kidnapping hag!’ he exclaimed passionately. ‘Ha! so she would take Minnie from me, would she? take away my little Minnie and never let me see her again? Say no — a thousand times no!’

John Haroldson’s ‘No,’ fierce as it was, was only an echo of that already sounded in the mother’s heart; but in her tender conscientiousness she felt bound to remind him of the advantages they were rejecting for the child.

‘I think you are right, dear,’ she said falteringly. ‘Though we must not forget that it is an opportunity for the darling to grow up a rich and accomplished woman. It will be very different for her if she stays with us, John.’

‘She *shall* stay with us,’ thundered the father. ‘She is our child, and that’s enough. Now go and tell the woman downstairs I said so. My little Minnie — did she want to

take away my little Minnie? But she shan't — go and tell her she shan't.'

'Yes, dear. You are quite right, I am sure. At least it would have broken my heart if you had decided differently.'

She went down, and as gently as possible announced the failure of her mission.

'You won't be angry,' she added in terror as she marked the look of stony displeasure settling on her sister's face.

'Oh! Leonora, you will have pity, you will help us even though we cannot give up our child. John will pay you back every farthing if he works for it night and day.'

'Mr. Haroldson has not chosen to oblige me, and he can hardly expect me to oblige him.'

'But Leonora, we could not have parted with her. She is everything to us — she and her sister.'

'Indeed! Well, I can only say that I hope there are not many parents who would so selfishly prefer their own happiness to that of their daughter.'

'She would not have been happy away from us,' broke in Mrs. Haroldson. 'You would have been very kind to her, I know, but she would have pined after us continually. The darling! she has hardly been out of our sight since she was born.'

Mrs. Fanshawe had made a step towards the door, but came back at these words.

'You say it is because the child herself might be unhappy that you will not accept my offer. Very well, then I repeat it in another form. I am willing to do everything for you and your husband that I have said, on the condition that the child shall come and stay six months in my house — with permission at the end of that time to remain or go as she pleases. All I stipulate for is that you will make no

attempt to influence her choice. What do you say to that?’

But still Mrs. Haroldson shook her head.

‘Don’t ask me, dear Leonora, don’t ask me. She is my own little darling child, and I cannot, cannot part with her.’

‘Just as you like, of course. Only in that case pray don’t try to persuade me that you are consulting her feelings in the matter rather than your own. Good-bye, Mary, I had really hoped that I might be of service to you.’

‘What will become of us?’ sobbed Mrs. Haroldson. ‘Oh! Leonora, you who are so rich and so happy, won’t you help us?’

‘That depends altogether on yourself. My offer is still open, and if you change your mind you have only to write and tell me. Thomas, let down the steps.’

She was already outside the house as she spoke, and in another minute was reclining on the luxurious cushions of her barouche and whirling rapidly away through the air.

Mrs. Haroldson remained for some time at her door, looking with tearful eyes after her sister’s carriage as it bowed merrily along in the evening sunshine. But in the midst of all her causes for grief and anxiety, and in spite of the tears in her eyes, there was at her heart something not unlike a sense of joy and triumph. For had she not kept Minnie, and was she not to keep Minnie still?

She was suddenly roused from her reverie by footsteps which sounded close beside her on the gravel-walk. She looked up with a start, and saw two men—attired shabbily and yet with a certain attempt at jauntiness—who, while she had been gazing into the distance, had entered the garden by the open gate, and now came to a pause within two or three paces of where she was standing.

‘Sorry to disturb you, mum,’ said the foremost, touching his hat with awkward courtesy as her eye met his.

She was not re-assured by the gesture, and started back in undefinable alarm.

‘Who are you?’ she asked tremulously. ‘What do you want?’

‘Don’t you be frightened, mum, I ain’t the chap, nor this gent neither, to put a lady to any unnecessary ill-convenience. But dooty is dooty, and dooty must be done. This will show you what we’ve come about, mum.’

He held a paper before her eyes as he spoke; she glanced at it, and, comprehending all, turned very pale.

The two men were sheriff’s officers.

CHAPTER V.

POVERTY, NOT WILL.

THE Haroldsons had always been respected by their neighbours, and a great deal of compassion was expressed in the village when it became known that the bailiffs were at the farm. Foremost amongst the sympathisers was he who had least means to help, Captain Pullyn, who came over early next morning to sit in the sick man’s chamber and give him what consolation and encouragement he could. But the task was a very thankless one, for the farmer was so utterly crushed and prostrated by his misfortunes as to appear for the time incapable of receiving comfort. The good captain was almost in despair as he found how ineffectual were all his efforts to excite even a single flash of the old hopeful energetic spirit.

‘I don’t see what the devil there is in it all that you should haul down your flag like this,’ he said, half dolefully,

half angrily. 'You are a young man—good twenty year younger than me, anyhow—you have your legs and arms all complete, a will to work, at least you ought to have, and a good conscience into the bargain. What more do you want to begin the world with?'

No answer, save a feverish tossing of the bedclothes.

'Look at me,' went on the captain—'Sixty year old next birthday, and all my cargo washed overboard in the same squall. But Lord bless you, I set to work baling the water out again, and what's happened? Why, I'm righting myself already. What do you think, I've got Brown Brothers—the great house at St. Austin's, you know—to promise to take on Joe as junior clerk from the day he's fifteen. And that ain't all, for I've lighted on a Commercial Academy for Young Gentlemen, highly recommended, that has agreed to do for him till then to the tune of seven pound a quarter. So with the little craft laid up safe in dock like that, there will only be a voyage or two a year for the old 'un to make, and everything will be ship-shape again, pretty nigh. Why shouldn't it be the same with you, mate?'

The farmer sighed hopelessly.

'I'll tell you what it is,' said the captain, his solicitude suggesting a new line of argument. 'If you go on like this, Jack, I shall say you're a damned fool, and that's all about it.'

'I dare say I am,' responded Haroldson feebly. 'But I can't help it.'

Captain Pullyn looked at his friend, and shook his head very gravely, as a physician in presence of a particularly unfavourable symptom.

'If I only knew how to put his blood up,' he muttered. 'It ain't natural to see him taking things like this. A good round of stiff swearing, now, would be worth any money.'

He reflected a moment, and resumed:

‘I wonder what Walter Lee is doing just now. Safe in New York, perhaps, sipping sherry-cobbler, bought and paid for with our money. A damned infernal rascal, eh?’

At the first mention of the name the sick man started convulsively, as one on whose newly-closed wound a rash finger has been laid. But he said nothing.

‘Oh, oh! you have forgiven him, have you?’ rejoined the captain tauntingly. ‘Anything you would like me to say to him if I chance to come across him on the other side of the water? Your love, I suppose, and would like to know how he finds himself.’

‘For God’s sake don’t,’ exclaimed the farmer hoarsely, and he writhed as though under the surgeon’s knife.

The captain looked at him with affected surprise.

‘Don’t! What do you mean? What am I not to do?’

‘Don’t speak to me of—of him, of that man. I have been trying all these weeks to forget him, and you will not let me.’

‘I don’t see why you should try to forget him. There’s a good reason why he shouldn’t like to think of you, but it is a reason that only cuts one way. He has done you hundreds of pounds’ worth of mischief, but you never did him a penn’orth.’

Haroldson made a new movement, so violent that it seemed almost like a spasm, and turned away his face as though determined to hear no more.

‘You are driving me mad,’ he cried tremulously. ‘For Heaven’s sake go away and give me a little peace.’

Captain Pullyn understood at last that his well-meant efforts were doing harm rather than good, and, shaking his head yet more gravely than before, reluctantly rose from

the bedside and quitted the room as softly as a pair of creaking boots would allow.

He found Mrs. Haroldson in the kitchen, attempting to occupy herself with the preparation of a dinner which she knew that neither she nor her husband would have heart to touch.

The two men who since yesterday had been the virtual rulers of the household were not actually present, their duty having for the while taken them to discuss a pipe and pot of beer in the trim little parlour which had been Mrs. Haroldson's especial pride. But, to say nothing of the strong odour of tobacco which sufficiently proved that they were not far off, they had left too many traces of themselves behind to make it possible to forget what had happened. They had been taking an inventory of the kitchen furniture that morning; and the disorder of the usually neatly arranged dresser, the ink bottle with two huge quills standing upright in it, and the black stains left to dry on the carefully scrubbed deal table, remained as so many mute evidences of the fact. Then the children, silently playing at cat's cradle in a corner, had a depressed, neglected look about them which to any one who knew them as they ordinarily were must have suggested that their mother's mind was preoccupied by a load of unwonted care. In imitation of the bailiffs, they had been very busy that morning with pen, ink, and paper, and the consequence was that their pinafores and fingers had come off even worse than the kitchen table. But nobody had spoken of changing the pinafores or washing the fingers.

'I am sorry to see Jack so down in the mouth,' said the captain, pausing to exchange a few words with Mrs. Haroldson before going out. 'It's half the battle to keep up a stout heart, in my opinion.'

‘If it were only possible,’ said the poor wife, with a sigh that went straight to the captain’s heart. ‘But it is very, difficult.’

‘So it is, so it is, but you must try for all that.’

‘It isn’t only for ourselves that I feel it,’ she continued, while the tears she had struggled to repress began to gather rapidly in her eyes. ‘But when I think of my poor innocent children . . . Oh! Captain Pullyn, how dreadful for them to be in the house while such things are going on! I feel almost as if I were doing them wrong to allow it.’

‘It is a pity of course, but anyhow it’s no fault of yours. You mustn’t fret yourself for what you can’t make different.’

As the captain spoke, Mrs. Haroldson did not forget that things might be made very different if she chose, by the simple process of writing to her sister. But she did not explain this to him, and left his assumption to go without contradiction. What was the reason for this reserve with her old friend she did not even herself suspect, yet there was a reason for it notwithstanding. It was this, that instinctively she knew the captain would vigorously condemn Mrs. Fanshawe’s offer, and Mrs. Fanshawe for making it. And unconsciously to herself the unhappy mother was beginning to regard Mrs. Fanshawe’s offer as a possible resource.

Captain Pullyn stood silent for a moment, looking sadly and thoughtfully at the children, then said abruptly:

‘I must be going now; good bye. And, Mrs. Haroldson, go up and sit awhile with Jack if you can. I don’t think he ought to be left too much by himself, and you will understand him better than I do.’

He grasped her hand warmly, and departed, leaving her to hasten upstairs to her husband’s bedside.

But John Haroldson was not to be roused by the tender

pleadings of his wife any more than by the rougher eloquence of the captain. In vain she forced herself to speak to him pleasantly and hopefully out of the depths of her own misery; he only shook his head and turned away in a blank dreary apathy perhaps even more painful to witness than a vehement demonstration of sorrow.

Suddenly he lifted his head from the pillow, and raised himself on one arm as though to listen. The sound of a childish sob had caught his ear, and his interest was roused at once.

‘What is Minnie crying for? Is she hurt?’

Mrs. Haroldson went to the door, and saw Minnie slowly ascending the staircase, crying the while as if her heart would break.

‘What is the matter?’ exclaimed John Haroldson again, ‘What have they been doing to her?’

The child heard her father’s voice, and came up with quickened pace, followed at a distance by Amy, who was considering the spectacle of her elder sister’s grief with a grave and solemn interest not unmixed with awe.

‘My pet! what is it? Come and tell father all about it.’

The assurance of her father’s sympathy made Minnie roar with redoubled vigour.

‘The men downstairs, she sobbed’ — ‘make them go away, father, please. They have taken away Selina’s house; they say it isn’t mine any more, but it is, isn’t it?’

Selina was Minnie’s favourite doll, and Selina’s house was a red brick villa, elegantly furnished according to the most approved doll fashion, and standing almost as high as Minnie herself—the child’s most costly possession.

The father’s lip quivered so that he could not speak. The mother drew the child towards her and endeavoured to com-

fort her, pressing the little head to her bosom and saying soothingly:

‘Never mind, my pet, never mind. Minnie must not think of it any more.’

‘Make them go away,’ persisted Minnie. ‘Tell them they shan’t have my things.’

‘My darling, I can’t,’ said Mrs. Haroldson helplessly. ‘You must not mind them, Minnie dear; they have a right to be here.’

‘But they shan’t take away Selina’s house,’ panted the child. ‘Mother, go and tell them they shan’t.’

‘They must do as they like, darling. Mother can’t help it.’

‘But it is mine,’ protested Minnie with a new flood of tears. ‘Father gave it me last birthday—all for myself. Father won’t let anybody take it from me, will you father?’

The farmer exchanged a glance of mute agony with his wife, and remained silent.

‘Father would do all he could for his little Minnie,’ said the mother. ‘But he must not say anything to those men, my pet.’

Minnie twisted her little hands tightly together, with a movement of childish grief which must have been hard for any parent to witness.

‘Why not? Father used not to be afraid of anybody. Why not?’

‘Because—because’ . . . The mother paused; how was she to make the child understand the grim necessities of the law of bankruptcy? ‘Because what we have does not belong to us any more, but to somebody else. Because poor people cannot do as they like, and we are very poor now.’

‘Are we? Then I want to be rich again; I won’t be poor any more.’

And the tiny frame became convulsed with violent, almost hysterical sobs, while the childish hands were wrung more tightly than ever.

For a minute there was silence, broken only by the child's sobs and a half-choked murmur, in which the words 'Selina's house' were alone audible. The mother felt herself powerless to comfort, and stole a despairing look at her husband. He was sitting up, propping himself on his elbow while he fixed his eyes with straining intensity on the weeping child before him. On his countenance there was an expression of doubt and pain such as may be imagined on the face of a prisoner stretched on the rack to make him confess or recant. And truly John Haroldson was on the rack just now if ever man was. Presently he took his eyes off the child, and turned them on his wife, whispering:

'What if you were to write to your sister?'

'I was thinking the same thing,' she answered faintly. 'It seems almost wicked to let her suffer like this when it might be so different.'

'Write then,' said the farmer quickly; 'write at once.' And he fell back on his pillow as one who has lost all sustaining power of nerve and muscle.

The mother once more addressed herself to the task of comfort.

'Don't cry, pet, don't cry. Mother will try to make the men go away, and Minnie shan't be poor any longer. Minnie shall be rich, and have dolls bigger than Selina.'

These assurances, and the soothing tone in which they were uttered, gradually had the desired effect, and in a few minutes Minnie was so far calm again as to perch herself on her father's bed with a promise to be very quiet while mother was writing.

Then Mrs. Haroldson drew forth from one of her repositories an old blotting case, and sat down to write, bending her head very low over her paper—perhaps that her husband might not see the tears that dropped on it. But the precaution was unnecessary, for he kept his eyes steadily averted, and lay with his face to the wall, caressing the hand of his little Minnie, which the child had slipped into his in a mute appeal for sympathy.

About an hour after this, Captain Pullyn coming from Hollsworth towards the farm, overtook Mrs. Haroldson on the point of entering her house from the same direction.

‘Hollo, Mrs. Haroldson,’ he said, as he held open the garden-gate to let her pass; ‘if you had told me this morning you had an errand in the village, I’d have been very pleased to save you the trouble.’

She had been too much absorbed hitherto to notice him, and started when she heard his voice.

‘I—I have been posting a letter,’ she stammered, and looked almost guilty in her confusion.

‘I’m afraid you think me a troublesome old fellow for poking my nose so often where I’m not wanted,’ said the captain as they went indoors, ‘but perhaps this time I may be a trifle of use. You were saying in the morning it was a pity for the little ’uns to be in the house while all this is going on, and so it is; and if it had been as square with the weekly bills at my lodgings as it was afore the Grand Consolidated went to the bottom, I’d have taken ’em away with me then and there afore you could say Jack Robinson. Howsoever, I’ve been back and had a grand palavar with my landlady—a regular tough old figure-head she is—and she says she’s willing to let me take ’em home for a week or two. What do you say, Mrs. Haroldson? You shall see

'em every day, and I'll warrant to make 'em happy. Hollo! my hearties, where are you off to? I can't set sail without my first and second mates, you know.'

'They are upstairs,' said Mrs. Haroldson. 'But—but don't call them, please; they would only be tantalised.'

Alas! how sorely was she tantalised herself! For she felt that had this offer come an hour earlier Minnie might have been hers still.

'Tantalised! who wants to tantalise 'em?' said the captain. 'You don't think I've been saying all this to back out of it, do you?'

'Oh no! but . . . Dear Captain Pullyn, don't think me ungrateful for your kindness—I can never forget it, but' . . .

'But what? Come, out with it.'

'We have made another arrangement,' she said, looking very pale. And then, bit by bit, the poor woman came out with her story; how her sister had offered them help on condition of gaining possession of Minnie, how at first they had refused, preferring all extremities to such a sacrifice, and how at last the child herself had unconsciously extorted their consent. But vainly she sought the captain's eye for a sign of approval. He shook his head, and looked more stern than ever she had seen him.

'It was for the darling's own good,' she protested feverishly. 'Whatever comes of it, it was done for her good.'

'It cannot be for her good that she should learn to forget her father and mother,' responded the captain gravely.

In spite of his benevolence, he had a touch of sternness in his nature which made him come out with harsh things occasionally.

The next moment the sight of Mrs. Haroldson's white woe-

begone face made him sorry he had said so much, and, feeling that it was cruel to give reasons against a step already taken, he put out his hand and strode away with a hoarse 'God bless you.'

No sooner did she find herself alone than the poor mother staggered into a chair, and let her head fall forward on her clasped hands with a groan of pain. The captain's words pressed upon her brain like lead. Could it be that in rending her soul in twain she had not even compassed that which she sought—the good of the child whom she desired to rescue from the ills of her own fate? Could it be that she condemned her daughter to suffer a poverty worse than that represented by forced sales and sheriffs' officers—the poverty of the heart? She dared not examine the question too closely. Be it as it might, it was too late to retract now. And then was it not possible, nay probable, that Minnie might not learn to forget her father and mother after all, that she might elect to return to them at the end of her six months' probation?

Probable or possible, the mother's heart clung to the hope which this chance left her, as a drowning man clings to the plank which may save him, or may but prolong his agony.

CHAPTER VI.

DELIVERED AS PER CONTRACT.

ONE day, about a week after Mrs. Haroldson had signified her consent to her sister's offer, the Fanshawe carriage, with the powdered coachman and footman appertaining thereto, once more stood at the farm-house gate, while in the farm-house kitchen there sat a prim maid-servant taking

a very disparaging survey of her surroundings. This was the day appointed for Minnie's induction into her new home, whither the carriage and the powdered coachman and footman and the prim maid-servant were waiting to convey her.

In strange contrast to all this pomp of claret-coloured panels, white silk calves, gold lace and flaunting ribbons, was a scene taking place the while in a room upstairs—the room where John Haroldson had lain for so many weeks, and still lay, for he had made but little progress during the last few days, and had not yet found energy or strength to leave his bed. Mrs. Haroldson, her eyes all red and swollen with weeping, was kneeling before Minnie, investing her with a neat little hat and pelisse on which the mother's fingers had been busy some days before in anticipation of the occasion. Minnie herself, just beginning to realise the fact that she was to leave father and mother and Amy for an indefinite time and to go alone among strangers, was crying bitterly at the prospect; while Amy, not understanding very well what was the matter, stood by looking at her sister with vague affrighted interest, such as may be felt in a victim ordered out for execution.

On the bed lay John Haroldson, his face turned towards the wall, and the bedclothes huddled round his head as though to shut out sight and sound. But they could not have been quite effectual for the purpose, for every now and then something would be said to make the apparently inanimate form perceptibly wince.

'I don't want to go to Aunt Fanshawe's,' protested Minnie through her tears—'not unless father and mother and Amy go too. Tell them I won't—tell them I want to stop behind with father and mother and Amy.'

‘Minnie will be very happy with Aunt Fanshawe,’ said the mother tremulously.

She almost broke down as she uttered the word, remembering what the consequences would only too probably be if they came true. She was a mother whose happiness had hitherto consisted in that of her children, and yet how fervently she hoped that her encouraging prophecy might be falsified!

‘Aunt Fanshawe will be very kind to Minnie, I dare say. She is very rich, you know, and will make Minnie rich too.’

‘I don’t want to be rich. I am rich enough already. Send them away, mother, and I’ll be so good—you can’t think how good I’ll be.’

At that moment Mrs. Haroldson would have given everything she possessed to have been able to rescind the fatal contract into which her sister had tempted her.

But what could she do? Mrs. Fanshawe had fulfilled her share of the engagement; a couple of hundreds had been advanced, the bailiffs had been got rid of, and Minnie could not now be retained without a flagrant breach of faith.

‘Minnie has always been good—Minnie has always been mother’s own little treasure. But mother has promised to let you go and see Aunt Fanshawe.’

The agony of grief and self-reproach which that promise cost her now! She bent over the child on the pretext of arranging the bows of the jaunty hat, in reality to conceal the tears which rose, scalding and blinding, to her eyes.

‘Minnie will have a great many pretty things given her to play with,’ she went on in a choking voice—‘prettier a great deal than what father and mother would be able to buy for her.’

‘Yes, but father and mother and Amy won’t be able to

see them, will they?' argued Minnie. 'I shan't care for them else. I'll break them,' she added with a passionate stamp of her little foot, and then there was a new burst of tears.

'Hush, darling, hush! Minnie must be good. Minnie must not spoil her things.'

'Will father and mother and Amy help me to play with them?' persisted the child.

'No, pet. But don't cry—perhaps Minnie will come back one day soon and tell us all about them.'

Minnie looked up eagerly.

'Come back! When? To-morrow?'

'Not to-morrow, darling. But some day, perhaps—if Minnie wishes it.'

The mother drew the little face towards hers, and covered it with kisses. She felt the child's tears hot on her cheek, and was almost comforted; surely when the time came Minnie could not fail to wish it.

'We must not keep them waiting too long,' she resumed with more courage in her voice. 'Come and say good-bye to dear father.'

She led her daughter to the bedside. The sick man raised himself, and, throwing his arms round the little neck, strained the child silently to his breast, with a fierce energy more eloquent than any words—so eloquent that, young as she was, Minnie knew that it wrung his heart to let her go from him. Instinctively she understood that the parting was an occasion even more calamitous than she had deemed; and, filled with grief and undefined terror, broke into a very tempest of sobbing.

'Father, don't let me go! Father, father! I want to stay with father.'

John Haroldson groaned aloud; and his wife fearing the consequences of prolonged agitation for his shattered nerves, hurried the child from the room.

‘Come down, darling, or you will make father ill again. Don’t cry—I can’t bear to see my Minnie cry.’

But in spite of all exhortations, Minnie cried and sobbed wildly all the way downstairs, not ceasing till she reached the august presence of the prim maid-servant, and then only in pure terror.

With admirable good-breeding, this personage, though secretly filled with scorn for what she saw of Mr. Haroldson’s house-keeping, rose with an air that was almost respectful.

‘The young lady is ready now, ma’am, I suppose?’

‘Very nearly,’ said the mother, stooping to wipe the tear-drops off the ribbons that tied Minnie’s hat. ‘My darling, only see what you have been doing. Minnie mustn’t cry any more.’

She rubbed the ribbons with her handkerchief, and the maid-servant looked on the while with a mild expression of tolerant contempt. Mrs. Haroldson had expended a great deal of time and taste on the fabrication of the little hat; but this fastidious critic saw at once that the shape was last year’s, and that the ribbons were not of the fashionable colour, and did not therefore understand the fuss that was being made about it.

‘It is a sad trial for her to part with us,’ said Mrs. Haroldson, looking up deprecatingly into the Abigail’s unsympathising face. ‘You see she has never been from home before.’

‘Oh indeed!’ was the gracious response.

‘But I tell her that you will all be very kind to her, and

so you will, I am sure. She is so very little, you know, to go among strangers.'

The words were spoken in a beseeching tone that was not lost on the person to whom they were addressed, and the slighting estimate she had already formed of Mrs. Haroldson fell some degrees lower still.

'Oh! we shall be sure to be very kind to her. Are you ready now, miss?'

'I have only this one glove to put on,' said Mrs. Haroldson in a husky voice. 'Keep your hand steady, darling, or I can't manage it.'

But her own hand was far unsteadier than the child's. And no wonder, for she was asking herself whether she would ever fit a glove on those dear little fingers again.

'There is no hurry of course,' said the other, in tones implying that there was the greatest hurry possible. 'Only that missis dines at seven, and particularly wishes to see the young lady before then.'

'We are quite ready now. Darling, come and let mother help to put you into the carriage. Minnie will like a ride in the nice carriage, won't she?'

Between her awe of the prim maid-servant and the exhaustion left by her previous fit of crying, Minnie seemed half stupified, and passively resigned herself while her mother carried her out to the garden-gate. It was only at the very last, when the tall footman laid his hand on her to help her up the carriage-steps, that she made a movement of resistance, clinging to her mother's neck with a vehemence that made poor Mrs. Haroldson's heart thrill with the worst pang it had known yet.

But there was no cure for it now; the clasp of the tiny arms was gently undone, and the reluctant child, weeping

anew, was seated beside Mrs. Fanshawe's delegate in Mrs. Fanshawe's carriage, while the tall footman sprang up behind and the coachman flourished his whip.

For a few seconds more the mother stood at the garden-gate smiling—she was determined that the last Minnie saw of her should be a smile. Then gradually a look of intense pain came across her face, making the still parted lips quiver, and almost reeling she made her way back to the house. The first object she saw was Minnie's doll, Selina, lying on the floor where the child had left it when called away to be dressed for the journey. It was an old battered thing with a broken nose and a dishevelled tow wig which Mrs. Haroldson had smiled at scores of times. But now the sight of this ugly sawdust-filled image seemed to rend her very heart-strings; she sat down beside it and burst into a flood of bitter tears.

So violent was her grief that little Amy, who had been lurking behind the door in hiding from the strangers, came forth in wonder to ask if mother had been naughty.

The poor woman rose to her feet with an effort at composure.

'Not naughty, dear—it was done for the best, God knows. But foolish, I am afraid—very, very foolish.'

She wiped her eyes, and, with a resolute attempt to be calm, went upstairs to her husband. He was lying very still as she entered—so still that at first she almost fancied that he must be sleeping. But it was not so, for presently he said—in a voice so strange and unnatural that she scarcely recognised it for his:

'Do you think she will come back to us, Polly? I shall never be my own man again if she doesn't.'

Mrs. Haroldson made no answer; she dared not trust her trembling lips to form one. But she felt that, for herself, if Minnie did not come back to them she must surely die.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. FANSHAWE'S NURSERY.

TO the great disgust of the prim maid-servant, Minnie cried persistently during the first half of the journey to Mrs. Fanshawe's, steadily and even sullenly rejecting all that functionary's attempted blandishments, and only redoubling her lamentations at suggestions of what her aunt would think of her for being so naughty. But time was more efficacious than the admonitions of her companion. Towards the end of the long drive Minnie had gradually become quiet, and, when at last she found herself passing through the busy streets of St. Austin's, she had so far recovered that wonder and curiosity began to assert themselves through her grief. She was still in sore trouble and tribulation, but through it all she could not help noticing the fine shops—so much bigger and grander than any she had yet seen—and inwardly marvelling at their magnificence. More amazed still she became presently when the carriage, which had now left the streets a little way behind, turned into a pretty road bordered by large white houses which stood each by itself in the middle of a beautiful garden, stopping at the gate of what seemed the most beautiful garden and largest house of them all.

Before she had summoned courage to ask what manner of place this was which looked so grand and yet so pleasantly inviting, the carriage had rolled up a broad gravelled sweep, and stood before a flight of white stone steps that led up to

the house between vases full of flowers and ferns. Quick as thought the carriage-door was flung open by the tall footman, while from the house appeared another tall footman, who looked like the twin brother of the first, only that Minnie had never before seen twins with white hair. She found herself being lifted out by one or both of them and deposited on the stone steps, and then she understood that the beautiful garden and large house were Aunt Fanshawe's.

Poor little Minnie! she felt terribly lonely and helpless standing in that strange place with strange faces around her, and the knowledge that father and mother and Amy were left miles and miles behind; and she was wofully disposed to begin crying again. But she knew that the eyes of the two tall footmen were upon her, and dared not—absolutely dared not. So, mute as a mouse, she suffered her duenna to take hold of her hand and conduct her up the steps into the house.

Here she found herself in a large hall—a room as it seemed to her—with mahogany chairs ranged on each side, and coats and hats hanging like gigantic leaves from the branches of a huge tree-shaped stand; while before her was a broad staircase covered with a thick carpet of complicated pattern, complicated still further by the colours cast on it by the sunbeams shining through a stained glass window on the first landing. The place was very solemn to Minnie—solemn in its dim rich lighting, solemn in its carpet-muffled echoes, solemn even in the close upholsterer's-shop smell which, crossed with a faint odour of cut flowers, seemed to impregnate the whole atmosphere with respectability and decorum. Her heart was very full, but she felt the same obligation not to cry here as she was wont to feel on Sundays at church.

This sense of what was due to her surroundings was increased rather than diminished when her conductress opened a door leading out of the hall, and ushered her into the temple where her aunt sat.

It was a handsome drawing-room with long folding windows opening on the garden, and the furniture and decorations were of an order of magnificence that Minnie had never even imagined possible. There was a great deal of gilding, and a great deal of looking-glass, and yards upon yards of silk hangings and gold fringes, and altogether an amount of splendour which made the child shrink into herself as a snail into its shell. In the midst sat Aunt Fanshawe, arrayed in a rustling silk dress, and looking so stately from the reflected glory of her belongings that Minnie felt twice as much afraid of her as when they had met in the farm-house kitchen.

To her, however, Aunt Fanshawe, awe-inspiring as she was in her grandeur, was evidently disposed to be gracious.

‘Come in, my dear child,’ she said encouragingly, seeing that Minnie seemed inclined to linger on the threshold. ‘Harris, if your master has come home, go and tell him that I wish him to step this way.’

Harris, which was the name of the prim maid-servant who had been appointed Minnie’s special attendant, departed on her errand, leaving her charge to feel more hopelessly forlorn than ever. The child would never have had courage to pilot her way through the curiously fashioned chairs and richly inlaid tables to her aunt, but her aunt made things easy by coming to her instead.

‘Sit down, my dear,’ and Mrs. Fanshawe placed herself on a sofa and drew her niece to her side. ‘And now tell me how do you like to be here?’

Minnie's lip quivered strangely but, but she made no answer.

'You must not be shy with me, my little darling. You are to be very fond of me, you know, and I shall be very fond of you. It will be very nice, will it not?'

On finding herself addressed thus kindly, Minnie's lip quivered more and more; and she was just about to burst into a flood of tears little expected by her aunt, when the door opened and a gentleman appeared whose entrance forced back the tears to their source anew.

He was a very tall gentleman, taller even than the white-haired footmen, and he had a bald patch on the top of his head which struck the child as peculiarly impressive. He had a pair of very large grey whiskers and wore a white neckcloth, and this to Minnie completed his description. Whether because of his height, or his bald patch, or his grey whiskers, or his white neckcloth, she felt very much afraid of him, especially when he came and stood close to where she sat, staring at her.

'This is the little girl, Henry,' said Mrs. Fanshawe, laying her hand on Minnie's head. 'A dear little thing, isn't she, and very like me?'

'So I should say,' answered the gentleman, and continued staring rather unmeaningly.

'I knew you would think so, Henry. See, my dear, this gentleman is your uncle Fanshawe.'

Minnie said nothing, but looked up into his face with her round blue eyes as if fascinated—not in a complimentary sense, however, but quite the reverse.

'Why can't you say something, Henry?'

'I have nothing to say, my dear,' responded the gentleman, languidly. 'The Bank have raised the rate again, but you don't care for that.'

‘No, I don’t,’ said Mrs. Fanshawe, tartly. ‘I mean the child, why can’t you find something to talk to her about?’

The gentleman looked very much perplexed, but obediently set himself to consider, and at length brought out:

‘I hope you are quite well to-day.’

Minnie hardly knew at first whether this was intended for her or not, but, on being coaxingly admonished by Mrs. Fanshawe to speak to her uncle, managed to respond with a feeble ‘Yes, thank you.’

The gentleman paused, quite at a loss how to carry on the conversation. At last a bright thought struck him, and he asked:

‘How old are you, little girl, and what is your name?’

She was again admonished by her aunt, and presently answered, rather more fluently this time, for it was according to established formula:

‘Six years old last birthday, and my name is Minnie Haroldson.’

‘And a very nice name too,’ said her aunt, graciously. ‘But don’t you fancy that perhaps Minna sounds prettier—more important, you know? I think in future it must be Minna, what do you say, dear?’

The child did not answer; the first terror inspired by the strange gentleman was gradually wearing off, and the little eyes were beginning to fill again.

‘And talking of names, don’t you think Fanshawe is a very pretty name?’ went on her aunt, musingly. ‘Good gracious, child, what’s the matter?’

She had just discovered that Minnie’s eyes were full of tears, which now began to drop very fast on the ribbons her mother had arranged so carefully.

‘What are you crying for? what do you want?’ demanded Mrs Fanshawe, in amazement.

‘I want to go home,’ said Minnie, breaking at this into a piteous howl. ‘I want to go home to father and mother and Amy.’

‘Hush, hush, I am quite shocked. This is your home now, my dear—don’t you think it is a very nice one?’

‘I want father and mother and Amy,’ repeated Minnie, sobbing. ‘I want’ . . .

‘My dear child, how can you go on so? you ought to know better, really. Don’t cry any more, my love—I will be your mama, and this gentleman your papa.’

She tried to put her arm round the child as she spoke, but Minnie pushed it roughly away with both hands.

‘You shan’t,’ the little voice cried impetuously. ‘I don’t want you to be my mamma, and I won’t let you. Oh dear! where are father and mother and Amy? Oh dear! dear!’

A succession of violent sobs drowned her further utterance, and Mrs. Fanshawe looked dubiously at her husband; she was beginning to question the success of her experiment,

‘Who would have thought of her having such a passionate temper? What a dreadful noise, to be sure! it seems to go through my very head. My dear, dear child, do have a little pity for my nerves. We shall be so happy if you will only be quiet.’

But Minnie, instead of being quiet, redoubled the vehemence of her lamentations, turning away from her aunt’s attempted caresses almost as though resenting them.

‘Do you know I begin to fear she is rather heartless?’ said the lady, and her countenance was very blank.

Mr. Fanshawe, who made a point of agreeing with his wife in everything, said he feared so too, and they both looked

at Minnie as though they could have wished her considerably further.

At this point—a very critical one in Minnie's career—the door was suddenly flung open by one of the tall footmen, and at the same moment a stentorian voice announced:

‘Mrs. Vesey and Miss Vesey.’

Minnie had been sitting near the door, and the stentorian voice sounded close at her ear. Her first impression was that the tall footman had come to do something dreadful to her, and the idea was so terrible as to petrify her into silence at once, with her eyes turned towards the door in trembling expectation of what was to happen next. When she found that he did not advance further into the room and only held the door open long enough to admit a gorgeous lady, rustling louder if possible than Aunt Fanshawe, followed by a little girl two or three years older than herself—but oh! so much more grandly dressed—she transferred her awe-struck interest to them instead, and sat watching their movements in mute puzzled wonderment.

‘Mrs. Vesey!’ cried Mrs. Fanshawe, starting from her seat with hospitable enthusiasm. ‘I am so very, very glad to see you. And you have brought your little girl too, I see—a sweet child she looks, to be sure. Now this is what I call really kind.’

Mrs. Fanshawe's raptures were on this occasion quite genuine. The visitor was not rich, was indeed poor as compared to the Fanshawes; but in right of her position as the daughter of a baronet of good family she was one of the acknowledged leaders of St. Austin's society, and the rich merchant's wife had been for years dying to get on her visiting list. This had at last been accomplished by the good offices of a common friend, and Mrs. Fanshawe, who

had made her first call a few days before, was in unfeigned ecstasy to find it so quickly returned.

‘You are very good, I’m sure,’ said Mrs. Vesey, who was aware of the increasing importance of Mr. Fanshawe’s commercial position, and considered the family decidedly worth cultivation. ‘My dear Arabella, shake hands with Mr. and Mrs. Fanshawe.’

At this moment she became aware of a pair of wondering blue eyes which, opened to their widest extent, were gazing at her, half curiously, half affrightedly, from behind Mrs. Fanshawe’s ample skirts.

‘What a beautiful child!’ she exclaimed, almost involuntarily. ‘You must be very proud of her, Mrs. Fanshawe, I am sure. And do you know I see a great likeness to her mamma?’

‘She is considered very like me,’ said Mrs. Fanshawe, with a sudden flush of gratification. The implied compliment to her good looks was very pleasant, but more delicious to her still, perhaps, was the maternal dignity with which her visitor’s hypothesis had for the moment invested her. ‘But—but—I have no family of my own, Mrs. Vesey. She is the daughter of a—a relation—a distant relation, that is—and is only staying with me on a visit. However, she is a dear little girl, and I am very fond of her.’

She looked down very complacently on her little niece, to whom she felt almost grateful for the compliment which the child had been the means of obtaining for her. And then how signally Mrs. Vesey’s admiration of Minnie confirmed her own discernment and good taste!

But Minnie did not respond to the complacent look at all, and was so manifestly on the point of outraging decorum

by a new fit of crying that her aunt rang the bell in some alarm, telling the footman who answered it:

‘Thomas, send Harris to take Miss Minna up to the nursery.’

Harris made her appearance, and Minnie was removed, happily without scandal in the shape of fresh tears, and her aunt explained:

‘She has only just arrived from a distance, and is sadly tired with her journey, poor dear child. I am so glad you are pleased with her, Mrs. Vesey. For myself, I have taken a prodigious fancy to her. In fact (between ourselves this is), I have serious thoughts of adopting her, for I lead a terribly dull life sometimes—with Mr. Fanshawe out all day, and even when he is at home so engrossed in business that he has hardly a word to say to me.’

She darted a reproachful look at Mr. Fanshawe, who cowered guiltily.

‘It would be a very good plan,’ said Mrs. Vesey sympathisingly. ‘A child is *such* a companion, you know. What I should do without my Arabella, for instance, I am sure I have no idea.’

The remark had the effect of making Arabella the subject of conversation; and, after a few minutes spent in discussing that young lady, her dispositions, and acquirements, Mrs. Vesey departed, very favourably impressed by the style in which her new friend lived. Mr. Fanshawe, much relieved, went back to his study to finish an elaborate calculation turning on the probable price of Scotch pig that day three weeks, and Mrs. Fanshawe was left to herself, thinking:

‘There may be a good deal of trouble with her at first, I dare say, but keep her I must and will.’

And thus resolving she went upstairs to the nursery.

It was quite an event for Mrs. Fanshawe, this going upstairs for the first time to her nursery. She had never had a nursery before, and the consciousness that such a sanctuary was at last hers—actually existed on the second floor of her own house, with a little inmate in it ready-made just at the age when children begin to be interesting without giving too much trouble—thrilled her with an entirely new feeling of dignity and importance. The ordering of Miss Minna up to the nursery in the presence of Mrs. Vesey had been one of the grand sensations of her life.

Mrs. Fanshawe's nursery was a very pleasant room—light and airy, situated in the most cheerful part of the house, and carefully fitted with all suitable appointments under her own superintendence. The evening was fine and sunny and Mrs. Fanshawe thought she had never looked at a more charming interior than now when she peeped in and saw the warm evening light shining on its bright-coloured paper and gay chintz hangings, and little golden-haired Minnie sitting at tea near one of the open windows. She was not quite so much pleased, however, a moment afterwards, when on advancing she found that Minnie was not eating, but slowly letting one big tear after another fall on a huge slice of bread and butter which she held intact in her hand. Still, remembering the gratifying scene downstairs, Mrs. Fanshawe would not let herself be disheartened.

‘Why, Minna dear,’ she said, going up and taking a seat at the tea-table, ‘I am afraid you don’t seem to be getting on very well with your tea. What’s the matter?’

‘I’m not hungry,’ said Minnie, staring dolefully at her bread and butter, and letting fall another tear.

‘But you ought to be hungry, my love, after all you have done to-day. Harris, bring out the jam; I wonder you did

not think of giving the poor child a little this evening. You like jam, dear, don't you?"

'Yes, I like jam,' said Minnie a little ungraciously. She was not in the mood to let herself be coaxed if she could help it; still a fact was a fact, and not to be controverted.

'Put down that great crust, dear, and I'll cut a nice delicate little slice for you myself, with plenty of jam on it. There, just taste that, Minna, and tell me how you like it.'

Minnie took a languid bite in obedience to her aunt's injunctions. The bread was new and the jam laid on very thickly, and as she had not tasted anything since the morning, she found herself more interested than a moment before she could have supposed.

'Well, my dear, it is very nice, isn't it?'

'Very nice,' said Minnie, and took another bite on her own account. She went on munching for a minute or two in silence, to Mrs. Fanshaw's infinite satisfaction, then at last, addressing her aunt for the first time spontaneously, said:

'Aunt Fanshawe.'

'Well, my love?'

'I may go home to-morrow to father and mother and Amy, mayn't I?'

Her aunt was rather staggered by the question; she was afraid of negating it too decidedly in case of a repetition of the stormy scene interrupted by Mrs. Vesey's visit.

'To-morrow, dear? Well, I don't think it must be quite so soon as to-morrow. To-morrow I was intending to take you out with me to look at some of the pretty shops, and to see if we could find anything in them that you would like for your own. Did you ever see a talking doll, Minna?'

The child opened her eyes with astonishment.

‘A talking doll! But dolls don’t talk.’

‘Oh yes! they do — some of them. I know a shop — I was thinking of taking you there to-morrow — where there are large dolls as big as real babies, that can open and shut their eyes and say “Mamma” quite plainly. You would like such a doll as that, wouldn’t you, dear?’

Minnie’s eyes, which had been opening wider and wider at the description, were dropped shyly at this; she paused, and then murmured very timidly:

‘Yes, please.’

‘That’s right, dear; then you shall go with me to-morrow and choose one.’

The child’s face flushed with pleasure. She pondered a little, and then said:

‘And when I go home may I take it with me? Amy will be so surprised — I dare say at first she will think it is a real baby.’

‘I dare say. But as Amy lives so far off, perhaps we had better go first and show it to some of the nice little girls I know at St. Austin’s. I shall take you to-morrow to pay them a visit, and we shall ask two or three of them to come and dine with you. And after dinner, Minna, we shall all go together to see Herr Schleitowand.’

‘I don’t know what that is.’

‘Herr Schleitowand is a very clever gentleman who is staying here a few days to show the people of St. Austin’s what he can do. And he can do such wonderful things — you will be quite surprised. What do you think of him making a plum-pudding in a hat, Minna? — mixing it, and boiling it, and turning it out quite ready — and all in less than five minutes.’

‘But he couldn’t,’ said Minnie, incredulously. ‘I am quite

sure he couldn't. Make a pudding in a hat! nobody could do that, you know.'

'You shall see him do it to-morrow, Minna, and he will give you a slice to taste.'

Minnie became transfixed with amazement, which increased as her aunt went on:

'But that is not nearly all he does. He can tear a pocket-handkerchief in two, and then with a wave of his hand mend it again so that you can't see the join; he can put a knife into his mouth and swallow it, and bring it out again presently at his wrist; and he can make a shilling dance on the table as if it were alive.'

Minnie had been holding her breath with wonder, and came out now with a great panting 'Oh!' necessary for the relief alike of her lungs and her bewildered faculties. This was followed by an interval of silence, during which she was collecting her ideas and otherwise recovering herself, and then she added with great decision:

'I should like to see him very much.'

'We are going there to-morrow, my love.'

'It will be very nice,' rejoined Minnie emphatically. 'Dear me! only fancy what father and mother will say when they hear where I have been. Do you think they ever saw him?'

'I can't say, I'm sure.'

'I know Amy never did. I wonder what she will think when I tell her. Make a plum-pudding in a hat — the idea! And swallow a knife — how dreadful! Doesn't it hurt him very much?'

'I don't suppose it does, dear, or he wouldn't do it.'

'But it must look dreadful to see him, must it not? I think Amy would be quite frightened. Oh dear! I wish it was to-morrow already.'

She made a quick petulant little movement of impatience, and her aunt smiled with inward gratification. Just then there was heard a knock at the nursery door, and a servant entered to say that dinner was served downstairs. Mrs. Fanshawe knew that her husband did not like to be kept waiting for dinner, and, indulgent to this little weakness, rose at once.

‘I must say good-night now, Minna, you will be in bed by the time I have finished dinner. will you kiss me, and say good-night?’

Minnie held up her mouth without hesitation.

‘Good-night, Aunt Fanshawe. What a very funny gentleman that must be!’

‘Yes, I am sure you will think so when you see him. But can’t you call me something else than always Aunt Fanshawe, dear? It is such a long name.’

‘It is your name, isn’t it?’ said Minnie, looking puzzled.

‘Yes, but you must find something else to call me by for short. Call me Mamma. Mamma is so much shorter than Aunt Fanshawe.’

‘But you are not mamma,’ reasoned Minnie. ‘Mamma is mother’s name, only I say mother instead.’

‘Never mind, dear, call me mamma, it is so much shorter.’

‘You are not mamma,’ obstinately persisted the child.

‘But you can call me mamma, can’t you?’ retorted Mrs. Fanshawe, a little sharply. ‘Come, my sweet child, let me hear you say it — Good-night, mamma.’

‘No, I won’t,’ said Minnie rebelliously.

The little mouth began to work ominously, and Mrs. Fanshawe understood that if she persisted further she would

have all the work of pacification to re-commence. So with a forced laugh she gave up her point.

‘You little funny thing! Well, call me Aunt Fanshawe or anything you like. And now good-night; Harris will give you the rest of your tea — take care she has what she likes, Harris — and at breakfast I shall come and talk to you again, and tell you what more I can remember about this clever gentleman we are going to see.’

She kissed the child again, and hurried from the room, leaving Minnie to finish her tea and question Harris concerning the wonderful gentleman who swallowed knives and made plum-puddings in his hat.

This topic, combined with hunger and bread and jam, proved so interesting that Minnie cried no more during the meal, nor indeed afterwards until she was being tucked up in her little bed for the night. Then she remembered that she had always till now been tucked up by her mother’s hands, and the absence of those hands — so kind, so caressing, and so dexterous at their task — made the hot tears flow forth anew. They continued to flow long after Harris had left her alone in the prettily furnished little bedroom leading out of the nursery — the most prettily furnished room in which she had ever slept — long after the light of the summer evening had melted into dusk, even after dusk had darkened into night.

But Nature came at last to her relief, and in pure exhaustion she fell asleep, dreaming that Amy had been changed by the clever gentleman into a talking doll.

CHAPTER VIII.

‘HARK, HOW I’LL BRIBE YOU.’

THE programme arranged by Mrs. Fanshawe was carried out in all its details next day, with general satisfaction to those concerned.

Minnie was taken to the best toy-shop of St. Austin’s, and there presented with the largest and most fashionably dressed doll to be found on the premises — one which possessed the further recommendation of emitting under certain conditions a discordant and unearthly noise, more resembling the quack of a duck than any other sound known in nature. After this purchase, and such a survey of the remaining wonders of the establishment as might be supposed to whet a desire to return on a future occasion, she was taken round to be introduced to a select circle of young friends, by whose society her aunt hoped to supply the companionship of Amy. Then came dinner, and afterwards a visit to Herr Schleitowand’s, where the child sat spell-bound with astonishment and curiosity—the marvels of the performance surpassing her wildest imaginings. There was no time to cry for home that day, even had she felt so disposed, but indeed she was far too much excited and interested to do anything except open her eyes very wide and ask a multiplicity of questions. Not that she had ceased to think of father and mother and Amy, for she was chattering about them constantly, but her thoughts of them seemed to be all coloured by the interests of the day. Instead of impatiently asking when she should return to them, she was always speculating on whether they could have seen this, that, or the other thing, and what they

would say of it if they had. Evidently she would have preferred for the present that they should come to her rather than that she should go back to them.

Aunt Fanshawe noted the change of tone, and was well satisfied. She would have been better pleased doubtless if the refrain of father and mother and Amy had recurred less frequently; but her experience of yesterday had taught her to be content with making slow approaches towards her object. Thus she did not thwart the child in speaking of the three persons who had hitherto constituted her world, nor did she commit the mistake of laying claim to any nearer and dearer title than that of Aunt Fanshawe.

That evening Minnie cried herself to sleep again—the foolish tears would break forth when she found herself in her lonely bed with no mother's face watching her—but sleep came much more speedily than the night before.

Another day followed, and another and another, and it was always contrived that Minnie should be interested and amused. Now it was a visit to the toy-shop to buy a peep-show; now it was a mysterious summons to come and look at something waiting for her in the garden—the 'something' proving to be an exquisite little Shetland pony bought expressly for Minnie's riding; now it was an entertainment given by her to her little friends, the chief feature of which was that real tea was served in china cups no bigger than a walnut-shell; now it was a magic-lantern exhibition; now a travelling circus; and so forth in never-ending variety.

Time passed on, and Minnie gradually began to bring the familiar home names less frequently into her conversation; and indeed it was not wonderful, considering how much else she had to think about, and talk about. Every now and then, it is true, she would be seized with a fit

of home sickness, and ask very wistfully when she was to see father and mother and Amy again; on which she would always be told that they were all quite well, and that father and mother would be glad to hear she was a good girl and did not fret. She found out by degrees that all her questionings and petitionings on this point did nothing to procure for her what she wanted, and slowly accustomed herself to transfer them to objects which she had a better chance of attaining.

At last she learned to fall asleep at night without crying, while in the day her laugh began to be heard without any particular pains being taken to excite it. The sound of that spontaneous, joyous laugh was like music in Mrs. Fanshawe's ears.

Weeks passed, then months, and Minnie had been living in her aunt's house for what seemed to her an incalculable period of time—so long that the idea of home, when she recalled it, appeared to be seen through a mist, as the memory of dream, while her new life, so uncomfortably strange and unfamiliar at first, had grown to be the most natural and matter-of-course thing in the world.

One day—long as the time looked to Minnie, it was in reality a little less than six months from the date of her arrival at St. Austin's—Mrs. Fanshawe called her, and asked her what she thought of getting up a ball for her little friends.

'A ball!' cried Minnie, her eyes sparkling with delight. 'A ball like what you went to last week, where they dance and play music and eat supper all night long! Oh Aunt Fanshawe, you don't mean that, do you?'

'Yes, I do, my dear. I have a list here of all the little boys and girls whom you might ask, and I find there would

be more than fifty. I would have the carpet up in the drawing-room and the floor chalked, and festoons of flowers put up over the doorways—just as I told you they had at Mrs. Robinson's. And then there would be supper served in the dining-room, and' . . .

'Aunt Fanshawe! do you really mean it?'

'Certainly, dear child. You do your steps so nicely now that I don't think there need be any hesitation about it. Suppose we drive round to-day to Miss Styles's, and ask her what sort of dress you ought to have? I was thinking that white tarlatane over a pink satin skirt, looped up with white or pink roses—with a pretty little wreath of something in your hair' . . .

'For me—all that for me! And you really are not joking?'

'I never was more serious in my life. Do you think that would make a pretty dress?'

'Oh Aunt Fanshawe! it will be lovely!'

'Then suppose I sit down now and write out the invitations for this day fortnight? Look here, Minna, this is my list—I have not left any one out, have I?'

The child came forward, and, leaning against her aunt's knees (all the old awe had long ago worn off), cast her eyes on a paper which Mrs. Fanshawe held before her. It was headed 'List of Guests for Minna's Ball.'

There was something so charming in the conjunction of the two last words that Minnie's delight fairly overflowed.

'Oh! how beautiful it will be!' she cried, rocking herself rapturously to and fro. 'Won't it—won't it?'

She turned her bright little face up as she spoke. The movement brought her lips within a few inches of her aunt's—a proximity which seemed to be suggestive, for, as though

yielding to a sudden impulse, she put her arm round Mrs. Fanshawe's neck and kissed her.

It was the first time Minnie had kissed her unasked, and Mrs. Fanshawe was in ecstasy.

'You dear darling!' she exclaimed, holding the child clasped to her side. 'You are very much pleased then?'

'Oh yes! Aunt Fanshawe—very much indeed,' said Minnie gratefully.

And then she tried to release herself, but in vain.

'Aunt Fanshawe—always Aunt Fanshawe! "Mamma" is so much shorter. Come, Minna dear, let it be "Mamma."'

Minnie made no answer. Aunt Fanshawe was holding her rather uncomfortably, so that she could not turn her head, and she was impatient to look over the list of guests.

'Dear child,' whispered Mrs. Fanshawe, 'it shall be Mamma—shall it not? Say "Yes, mamma," there's a pet.'

'Yes, mamma,' said Minnie. The words were breathed in a very low voice, almost as if she were ashamed of them, but they were enough for Mrs. Fanshawe, over whose face came a glow of triumph and exultation.

And then Minnie got loose, and the debate on the approaching festivity was continued with new ardour.

For the next few days all was excitement and hubbub in Mrs. Fanshawe's house and Minnie's head. Nothing was said, or done, or thought of, that had not some bearing on the forthcoming great event. As for Minnie, sleeping and waking, her mind was running on satin skirts and tarlatanes, and artificial flowers, and white kid-shoes and open-worked silk stockings, and chalked floors and ornamented doorways, and long supper-tables, as constantly as though the giving of a ball was to her the great be-all and end-all of existence.

And so indeed it is pretty certain that for the time it was. But Mrs. Fanshawe never made any attempt to moderate the intensity of her expectation.

Day after day passed on, and the preparations for the great occasion gradually advanced towards maturity. The carpet in the drawing-room was taken up, the upholsterers were getting on with the decorations, the confectioner had received his orders about the supper, little programmes of the dances had been printed on satin paper, the musicians were engaged—in fine, all the necessary machinery had been set in motion and was working bravely. And at last, on the day before that fixed for the entertainment, Miss Styles sent home the dress.

What a triumph of art it looked, to be sure, as it lay spread on the couch in Mrs. Fanshawe's bedroom, with its rose-bud trimmings and flowing folds of tarlatane well shaken out and displayed in their fullest glory! And then the exquisite little wreath made to match which had been sent home with it! Minnie could not repress a shriek of enthusiasm at the sight.

‘How beautiful! And is that really for me? I shall be grander than anybody else in the room to-morrow evening, shan't I?’

‘I should think you would, my dear; it will become you beautifully, I am certain.’

‘That it will. I may try it on, mayn't I? Shall I run and call Harris to help me?’

‘Presently, dear. But sit down a few minutes by me. I have something to say to you first. Are you attending, Minna?’

‘Yes, Aunt Fan— yes, I mean,’ answered Minnie absently,

taking her eyes with difficulty off Miss Styles's *chef d'œuvre*.

She had not yet got into the habit of calling Mrs. Fanshawe mamma, but she conceded so far as seldom or never to use the more distant appellation to which her aunt objected.

'Minna, do you ever think of home now?'

Minnie started; she had been thinking very little of home for the last few days.

'Oh yes,' she answered, hanging her head a little. 'Dear me, what *would* father and mother and Amy say if they saw me in such a beautiful dress as that?'

'You were very anxious to return to them a few months ago. What would you think if I let you go back to-morrow morning?'

'Go back to see father and mother and Amy! Oh! I should like it so much!' and the childish blue eyes glistened at the prospect. 'But . . . but not to-morrow morning. To-morrow is the day of the ball, you know.'

'I know, my dear child, and I should be very sorry for you to lose the pleasure, I am sure. But if you go at all, it must be to-morrow morning.'

'To-morrow morning! But I can't—you know I can't,' argued Minnie, looking very much perplexed. 'The ball is to be to-morrow.'

'Oh! I should manage to make excuses for you to your little friends—you need not mind on that account. There will be plenty of them, you know, and what with dancing and supper, and talking and laughing, they won't miss you much, I dare say.'

Minnie's face looked awfully blank.

'I don't know what you mean,' she said after a pause,

during which she seemed half ready to cry. 'I must be at the ball—I must wear my beautiful new dress. Tell father and mother I can't come till the day after to-morrow.'

'It cannot be managed so, my love. It is necessary you should go home to-morrow morning, unless indeed you wish to stay with me altogether.'

Minnie looked at her new dress, and the tears began to gather in her eyes.

'I don't know what you mean,' she repeated, shaking her head helplessly.

'I will explain. When you came to me first, Minna, it was arranged that you should remain here six months, and that then you should make your choice between going home and staying with me always. This is the last day of the six months; to-morrow they will have quite run out; and your—your friends will expect to hear what you have decided. So you see I must ask you to make up your mind, my dear. What shall we write to them—that they may expect you to-morrow?'

'The day after to-morrow,' said Minnie.

'That will not do, my dear. If you stay over to-morrow, you must stay altogether. But that will be very pleasant, won't it? You wouldn't like to leave me, and your pretty pony, and your doll, and your magic-lantern, and all your nice little friends here, surely? And you know you would not be able to take any of them with you.'

'What! not Shetland?' said the child ruefully. 'But I could come and see him sometimes, you know—oh! I should come very often.'

'No, you would not,' rejoined Mrs. Fanshawe a little bitterly. 'If you go, I should send Shetland back to the man I bought him from, and give away all your playthings to poor little children who would know how to value them

better than you do. You would never see any of them again. As for your new dress, I think I know a little girl whom it would just fit,' she continued with a reflective air.

'But it is mine,' said Minnie, fairly crying by this time. 'I am to wear it at the ball.'

'Yes, if you make up your mind that you will remain to live with me—but not unless. Now you know what you have to choose, and you can answer. Will you stay here always, or go home to-morrow?'

Minnie looked very hard through her tears at the new dress.

'I will stay here, and go home sometimes to see father and mother and Amy. I should like to see them sometimes.'

'That will not do either, Minna. If you make up your mind to live with me, there must be no going home to see anybody. This will be your home, and you must not think of any other.'

'Don't father and mother want to see me then?' asked Minnie with a great burst of tears.

Mrs. Fanshawe turned very red, and hesitated for a moment. She had a conscience—such a conscience perhaps as shrinks from the *malum prohibitum* rather than from the *malum in se*, but still a conscience—and though she could manage a tolerable number of white lies, a downright falsehood stuck in her throat.

'It will be a great deal better for your father and mother—and Amy too—that you should stay with me,' she answered at last evasively; 'and if you do, it will not be proper or convenient for you to see them. You have been very happy without seeing them for the last six months, I am sure.'

‘Yes, but I want to see them again for all that, and it is very naughty of them not to want to see me too.’

‘They are rather ill off, my dear, and would find you very much in their way. Besides, it is for your own good that you should live here rather than there. If you go back to them, you would be poor and badly dressed and have no pretty playthings, but if you stay with me you shall have everything you want, and be a rich lady some day—as rich as I am.’

‘And then I may go and see them sometimes—when I am a rich lady like you—mayn’t I?’ asked the child eagerly.

‘Then? Oh yes! certainly—if you wish it. Well, Minna, what is to be done? Shall we let them know that you have chosen to stay with me always, or would you rather go away to-morrow and leave me to apologise to your young friends in the evening? You need not mind about your dress—I can easily find somebody to give it to.’

Minnie looked very much frightened.

‘No, no,’ she cried hastily, ‘I will stay. I would much rather stay.’

‘My own sweet pet!’ exclaimed Mrs. Fanshawe, folding the child delightedly to her breast. ‘You are a darling lamb, and you will look like a queen to-morrow night, that you will.’

But to her disappointment Minnie was crying still.

‘Don’t cry, love, don’t cry. Look, I shall ring for Harris and tell her you would like to have your nice new dress tried on.’

The dress was tried on, and, in the contemplation of her own pretty little figure decked out in satin and gauze and flowers, Minnie’s tears gradually dried. Somehow she was not quite happy, but she had neither time nor skill to ana-

anew, was seated beside Mrs. Fanshawe's delegate in Mrs. Fanshawe's carriage, while the tall footman sprang up behind and the coachman flourished his whip.

For a few seconds more the mother stood at the garden-gate smiling—she was determined that the last Minnie saw of her should be a smile. Then gradually a look of intense pain came across her face, making the still parted lips quiver, and almost reeling she made her way back to the house. The first object she saw was Minnie's doll, Selina, lying on the floor where the child had left it when called away to be dressed for the journey. It was an old battered thing with a broken nose and a dishevelled tow wig which Mrs. Haroldson had smiled at scores of times. But now the sight of this ugly sawdust-filled image seemed to rend her very heart-strings; she sat down beside it and burst into a flood of bitter tears.

So violent was her grief that little Amy, who had been lurking behind the door in hiding from the strangers, came forth in wonder to ask if mother had been naughty.

The poor woman rose to her feet with an effort at composure.

'Not naughty, dear—it was done for the best, God knows. But foolish, I am afraid—very, very foolish.'

She wiped her eyes, and, with a resolute attempt to be calm, went upstairs to her husband. He was lying very still as she entered—so still that at first she almost fancied that he must be sleeping. But it was not so, for presently he said—in a voice so strange and unnatural that she scarcely recognised it for his:

'Do you think she will come back to us, Polly? I shall never be my own man again if she doesn't.'

Mrs. Haroldson made no answer; she dared not trust her trembling lips to form one. But she felt that, for herself, if Minnie did not come back to them she must surely die.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. FANSHAWE'S NURSERY.

To the great disgust of the prim maid-servant, Minnie cried persistently during the first half of the journey to Mrs. Fanshawe's, steadily and even sullenly rejecting all that functionary's attempted blandishments, and only redoubling her lamentations at suggestions of what her aunt would think of her for being so naughty. But time was more efficacious than the admonitions of her companion. Towards the end of the long drive Minnie had gradually become quiet, and, when at last she found herself passing through the busy streets of St. Austin's, she had so far recovered that wonder and curiosity began to assert themselves through her grief. She was still in sore trouble and tribulation, but through it all she could not help noticing the fine shops—so much bigger and grander than any she had yet seen—and inwardly marvelling at their magnificence. More amazed still she became presently when the carriage, which had now left the streets a little way behind, turned into a pretty road bordered by large white houses which stood each by itself in the middle of a beautiful garden, stopping at the gate of what seemed the most beautiful garden and largest house of them all.

Before she had summoned courage to ask what manner of place this was which looked so grand and yet so pleasantly inviting, the carriage had rolled up a broad gravelled sweep, and stood before a flight of white stone steps that led up to

the house between vases full of flowers and ferns. Quick as thought the carriage-door was flung open by the tall footman, while from the house appeared another tall footman, who looked like the twin brother of the first, only that Minnie had never before seen twins with white hair. She found herself being lifted out by one or both of them and deposited on the stone steps, and then she understood that the beautiful garden and large house were Aunt Fanshawe's.

Poor little Minnie! she felt terribly lonely and helpless standing in that strange place with strange faces around her, and the knowledge that father and mother and Amy were left miles and miles behind; and she was wofully disposed to begin crying again. But she knew that the eyes of the two tall footmen were upon her, and dared not—absolutely dared not. So, mute as a mouse, she suffered her duenna to take hold of her hand and conduct her up the steps into the house.

Here she found herself in a large hall—a room as it seemed to her—with mahogany chairs ranged on each side, and coats and hats hanging like gigantic leaves from the branches of a huge tree-shaped stand; while before her was a broad staircase covered with a thick carpet of complicated pattern, complicated still further by the colours cast on it by the sunbeams shining through a stained glass window on the first landing. The place was very solemn to Minnie—solemn in its dim rich lighting, solemn in its carpet-muffled echoes, solemn even in the close upholsterer's-shop smell which, crossed with a faint odour of cut flowers, seemed to impregnate the whole atmosphere with respectability and decorum. Her heart was very full, but she felt the same obligation not to cry here as she was wont to feel on Sundays at church.

This sense of what was due to her surroundings was increased rather than diminished when her conductress opened a door leading out of the hall, and ushered her into the temple where her aunt sat.

It was a handsome drawing-room with long folding windows opening on the garden, and the furniture and decorations were of an order of magnificence that Minnie had never even imagined possible. There was a great deal of gilding, and a great deal of looking-glass, and yards upon yards of silk hangings and gold fringes, and altogether an amount of splendour which made the child shrink into herself as a snail into its shell. In the midst sat Aunt Fanshawe, arrayed in a rustling silk dress, and looking so stately from the reflected glory of her belongings that Minnie felt twice as much afraid of her as when they had met in the farm-house kitchen.

To her, however, Aunt Fanshawe, awe-inspiring as she was in her grandeur, was evidently disposed to be gracious.

‘Come in, my dear child,’ she said encouragingly, seeing that Minnie seemed inclined to linger on the threshold. ‘Harris, if your master has come home, go and tell him that I wish him to step this way.’

Harris, which was the name of the prim maid-servant who had been appointed Minnie’s special attendant, departed on her errand, leaving her charge to feel more hopelessly forlorn than ever. The child would never have had courage to pilot her way through the curiously fashioned chairs and richly inlaid tables to her aunt, but her aunt made things easy by coming to her instead.

‘Sit down, my dear,’ and Mrs. Fanshawe placed herself on a sofa and drew her niece to her side. ‘And now tell me how do you like to be here?’

Minnie's lip quivered strangely but, but she made no answer.

'You must not be shy with me, my little darling. You are to be very fond of me, you know, and I shall be very fond of you. It will be very nice, will it not?'

On finding herself addressed thus kindly, Minnie's lip quivered more and more; and she was just about to burst into a flood of tears little expected by her aunt, when the door opened and a gentleman appeared whose entrance forced back the tears to their source anew.

He was a very tall gentleman, taller even than the white-haired footmen, and he had a bald patch on the top of his head which struck the child as peculiarly impressive. He had a pair of very large grey whiskers and wore a white neckcloth, and this to Minnie completed his description. Whether because of his height, or his bald patch, or his grey whiskers, or his white neckcloth, she felt very much afraid of him, especially when he came and stood close to where she sat, staring at her.

'This is the little girl, Henry,' said Mrs. Fanshawe, laying her hand on Minnie's head. 'A dear little thing, isn't she, and very like me?'

'So I should say,' answered the gentleman, and continued staring rather unmeaningly.

'I knew you would think so, Henry. See, my dear, this gentleman is your uncle Fanshawe.'

Minnie said nothing, but looked up into his face with her round blue eyes as if fascinated—not in a complimentary sense, however, but quite the reverse.

'Why can't you say something, Henry?'

'I have nothing to say, my dear,' responded the gentleman, languidly. 'The Bank have raised the rate again, but you don't care for that.'

‘No, I don’t,’ said Mrs. Fanshawe, tartly. ‘I mean the child, why can’t you find something to talk to her about?’

The gentleman looked very much perplexed, but obediently set himself to consider, and at length brought out:

‘I hope you are quite well to-day.’

Minnie hardly knew at first whether this was intended for her or not, but, on being coaxingly admonished by Mrs. Fanshawe to speak to her uncle, managed to respond with a feeble ‘Yes, thank you.’

The gentleman paused, quite at a loss how to carry on the conversation. At last a bright thought struck him, and he asked:

‘How old are you, little girl, and what is your name?’

She was again admonished by her aunt, and presently answered, rather more fluently this time, for it was according to established formula:

‘Six years old last birthday, and my name is Minnie Haroldson.’

‘And a very nice name too,’ said her aunt, graciously. ‘But don’t you fancy that perhaps Minna sounds prettier—more important, you know? I think in future it must be Minna, what do you say, dear?’

The child did not answer; the first terror inspired by the strange gentleman was gradually wearing off, and the little eyes were beginning to fill again.

‘And talking of names, don’t you think Fanshawe is a very pretty name?’ went on her aunt, musingly. ‘Good gracious, child, what’s the matter?’

She had just discovered that Minnie’s eyes were full of tears, which now began to drop very fast on the ribbons her mother had arranged so carefully.

‘What are you crying for? what do you want?’ demanded Mrs Fanshawe, in amazement.

‘I want to go home,’ said Minnie, breaking at this into a piteous howl. ‘I want to go home to father and mother and Amy.’

‘Hush, hush, I am quite shocked. This is your home now, my dear—don’t you think it is a very nice one?’

‘I want father and mother and Amy,’ repeated Minnie, sobbing. ‘I want’ . . .

‘My dear child, how can you go on so? you ought to know better, really. Don’t cry any more, my love—I will be your mama, and this gentleman your papa.’

She tried to put her arm round the child as she spoke, but Minnie pushed it roughly away with both hands.

‘You shan’t,’ the little voice cried impetuously. ‘I don’t want you to be my mamma, and I won’t let you. Oh dear! where are father and mother and Amy? Oh dear! dear!’

A succession of violent sobs drowned her further utterance, and Mrs. Fanshawe looked dubiously at her husband; she was beginning to question the success of her experiment,

‘Who would have thought of her having such a passionate temper? What a dreadful noise, to be sure! it seems to go through my very head. My dear, dear child, do have a little pity for my nerves. We shall be so happy if you will only be quiet.’

But Minnie, instead of being quiet, redoubled the vehemence of her lamentations, turning away from her aunt’s attempted caresses almost as though resenting them.

‘Do you know I begin to fear she is rather heartless?’ said the lady, and her countenance was very blank.

Mr. Fanshawe, who made a point of agreeing with his wife in everything, said he feared so too, and they both looked

at Minnie as though they could have wished her considerably further.

At this point—a very critical one in Minnie's career—the door was suddenly flung open by one of the tall footmen, and at the same moment a stentorian voice announced:

‘Mrs. Vesey and Miss Vesey.’

Minnie had been sitting near the door, and the stentorian voice sounded close at her ear. Her first impression was that the tall footman had come to do something dreadful to her, and the idea was so terrible as to petrify her into silence at once, with her eyes turned towards the door in trembling expectation of what was to happen next. When she found that he did not advance further into the room and only held the door open long enough to admit a gorgeous lady, rustling louder if possible than Aunt Fanshawe, followed by a little girl two or three years older than herself—but oh! so much more grandly dressed—she transferred her awe-struck interest to them instead, and sat watching their movements in mute puzzled wonderment.

‘Mrs. Vesey!’ cried Mrs. Fanshawe, starting from her seat with hospitable enthusiasm. ‘I am so very, very glad to see you. And you have brought your little girl too, I see—a sweet child she looks, to be sure. Now this is what I call really kind.’

Mrs. Fanshawe's raptures were on this occasion quite genuine. The visitor was not rich, was indeed poor as compared to the Fanshawes; but in right of her position as the daughter of a baronet of good family she was one of the acknowledged leaders of St. Austin's society, and the rich merchant's wife had been for years dying to get on her visiting list. This had at last been accomplished by the good offices of a common friend, and Mrs. Fanshawe, who

had made her first call a few days before, was in unfeigned ecstasy to find it so quickly returned.

‘You are very good, I’m sure,’ said Mrs. Vesey, who was aware of the increasing importance of Mr. Fanshawe’s commercial position, and considered the family decidedly worth cultivation. ‘My dear Arabella, shake hands with Mr. and Mrs. Fanshawe.’

At this moment she became aware of a pair of wondering blue eyes which, opened to their widest extent, were gazing at her, half curiously, half affrightedly, from behind Mrs. Fanshawe’s ample skirts.

‘What a beautiful child!’ she exclaimed, almost involuntarily. ‘You must be very proud of her, Mrs. Fanshawe, I am sure. And do you know I see a great likeness to her mamma?’

‘She is considered very like me,’ said Mrs. Fanshawe, with a sudden flush of gratification. The implied compliment to her good looks was very pleasant, but more delicious to her still, perhaps, was the maternal dignity with which her visitor’s hypothesis had for the moment invested her. ‘But—but—I have no family of my own, Mrs. Vesey. She is the daughter of a—a relation—a distant relation, that is—and is only staying with me on a visit. However, she is a dear little girl, and I am very fond of her.’

She looked down very complacently on her little niece, to whom she felt almost grateful for the compliment which the child had been the means of obtaining for her. And then how signally Mrs. Vesey’s admiration of Minnie confirmed her own discernment and good taste!

But Minnie did not respond to the complacent look at all, and was so manifestly on the point of outraging decorum

by a new fit of crying that her aunt rang the bell in some alarm, telling the footman who answered it:

‘Thomas, send Harris to take Miss Minna up to the nursery.’

Harris made her appearance, and Minnie was removed, happily without scandal in the shape of fresh tears, and her aunt explained:

‘She has only just arrived from a distance, and is sadly tired with her journey, poor dear child. I am so glad you are pleased with her, Mrs. Vesey. For myself, I have taken a prodigious fancy to her. In fact (between ourselves this is), I have serious thoughts of adopting her, for I lead a terribly dull life sometimes—with Mr. Fanshawe out all day, and even when he is at home so engrossed in business that he has hardly a word to say to me.’

She darted a reproachful look at Mr. Fanshawe, who cowered guiltily.

‘It would be a very good plan,’ said Mrs. Vesey sympathisingly. ‘A child is *such* a companion, you know. What I should do without my Arabella, for instance, I am sure I have no idea.’

The remark had the effect of making Arabella the subject of conversation; and, after a few minutes spent in discussing that young lady, her dispositions, and acquirements, Mrs. Vesey departed, very favourably impressed by the style in which her new friend lived. Mr. Fanshawe, much relieved, went back to his study to finish an elaborate calculation turning on the probable price of Scotch pig that day three weeks, and Mrs. Fanshawe was left to herself, thinking:

‘There may be a good deal of trouble with her at first, I dare say, but keep her I must and will.’

And thus resolving she went upstairs to the nursery.

It was quite an event for Mrs. Fanshawe, this going upstairs for the first time to her nursery. She had never had a nursery before, and the consciousness that such a sanctuary was at last hers—actually existed on the second floor of her own house, with a little inmate in it ready-made just at the age when children begin to be interesting without giving too much trouble—thrilled her with an entirely new feeling of dignity and importance. The ordering of Miss Minna up to the nursery in the presence of Mrs. Vesey had been one of the grand sensations of her life.

Mrs. Fanshawe's nursery was a very pleasant room—light and airy, situated in the most cheerful part of the house, and carefully fitted with all suitable appointments under her own superintendence. The evening was fine and sunny and Mrs. Fanshawe thought she had never looked at a more charming interior than now when she peeped in and saw the warm evening light shining on its bright-coloured paper and gay chintz hangings, and little golden-haired Minnie sitting at tea near one of the open windows. She was not quite so much pleased, however, a moment afterwards, when on advancing she found that Minnie was not eating, but slowly letting one big tear after another fall on a huge slice of bread and butter which she held intact in her hand. Still, remembering the gratifying scene downstairs, Mrs. Fanshawe would not let herself be disheartened.

‘Why, Minna dear,’ she said, going up and taking a seat at the tea-table, ‘I am afraid you don’t seem to be getting on very well with your tea. What’s the matter?’

‘I’m not hungry,’ said Minnie, staring dolefully at her bread and butter, and letting fall another tear.

‘But you ought to be hungry, my love, after all you have done to-day. Harris, bring out the jam; I wonder you did

not think of giving the poor child a little this evening. You like jam, dear, don't you?"

'Yes, I like jam,' said Minnie a little ungraciously. She was not in the mood to let herself be coaxed if she could help it; still a fact was a fact, and not to be controverted.

'Put down that great crust, dear, and I'll cut a nice delicate little slice for you myself, with plenty of jam on it. There, just taste that, Minna, and tell me how you like it.'

Minnie took a languid bite in obedience to her aunt's injunctions. The bread was new and the jam laid on very thickly, and as she had not tasted anything since the morning, she found herself more interested than a moment before she could have supposed.

'Well, my dear, it is very nice, isn't it?'

'Very nice,' said Minnie, and took another bite on her own account. She went on munching for a minute or two in silence, to Mrs. Fanshaw's infinite satisfaction, then at last, addressing her aunt for the first time spontaneously, said:

'Aunt Fanshawe.'

'Well, my love?'

'I may go home to-morrow to father and mother and Amy, mayn't I?'

Her aunt was rather staggered by the question; she was afraid of negating it too decidedly in case of a repetition of the stormy scene interrupted by Mrs. Vesey's visit.

'To-morrow, dear? Well, I don't think it must be quite so soon as to-morrow. To-morrow I was intending to take you out with me to look at some of the pretty shops, and to see if we could find anything in them that you would like for your own. Did you ever see a talking doll, Minna?'

The child opened her eyes with astonishment.

‘A talking doll! But dolls don’t talk.’

‘Oh yes! they do — some of them. I know a shop — I was thinking of taking you there to-morrow — where there are large dolls as big as real babies, that can open and shut their eyes and say “Mamma” quite plainly. You would like such a doll as that, wouldn’t you, dear?’

Minnie’s eyes, which had been opening wider and wider at the description, were dropped shyly at this; she paused, and then murmured very timidly:

‘Yes, please.’

‘That’s right, dear; then you shall go with me to-morrow and choose one.’

The child’s face flushed with pleasure. She pondered a little, and then said:

‘And when I go home may I take it with me? Amy will be so surprised — I dare say at first she will think it is a real baby.’

‘I dare say. But as Amy lives so far off, perhaps we had better go first and show it to some of the nice little girls I know at St. Austin’s. I shall take you to-morrow to pay them a visit, and we shall ask two or three of them to come and dine with you. And after dinner, Minna, we shall all go together to see Herr Schleitowand.’

‘I don’t know what that is.’

‘Herr Schleitowand is a very clever gentleman who is staying here a few days to show the people of St. Austin’s what he can do. And he can do such wonderful things — you will be quite surprised. What do you think of him making a plum-pudding in a hat, Minna? — mixing it, and boiling it, and turning it out quite ready — and all in less than five minutes.’

‘But he couldn’t,’ said Minnie, incredulously. ‘I am quite

sure he couldn't. Make a pudding in a hat! nobody could do that, you know.'

'You shall see him do it to-morrow, Minna, and he will give you a slice to taste.'

Minnie became transfixed with amazement, which increased as her aunt went on:

'But that is not nearly all he does. He can tear a pocket-handkerchief in two, and then with a wave of his hand mend it again so that you can't see the join; he can put a knife into his mouth and swallow it, and bring it out again presently at his wrist; and he can make a shilling dance on the table as if it were alive.'

Minnie had been holding her breath with wonder, and came out now with a great panting 'Oh!' necessary for the relief alike of her lungs and her bewildered faculties. This was followed by an interval of silence, during which she was collecting her ideas and otherwise recovering herself, and then she added with great decision:

'I should like to see him very much.'

'We are going there to-morrow, my love.'

'It will be very nice,' rejoined Minnie emphatically. 'Dear me! only fancy what father and mother will say when they hear where I have been. Do you think they ever saw him?'

'I can't say, I'm sure.'

'I know Amy never did. I wonder what she will think when I tell her. Make a plum-pudding in a hat — the idea! And swallow a knife — how dreadful! Doesn't it hurt him very much?'

'I don't suppose it does, dear, or he wouldn't do it.'

'But it must look dreadful to see him, must it not? I think Amy would be quite frightened. Oh dear! I wish it was to-morrow already.'

She made a quick petulant little movement of impatience, and her aunt smiled with inward gratification. Just then there was heard a knock at the nursery door, and a servant entered to say that dinner was served downstairs. Mrs. Fanshawe knew that her husband did not like to be kept waiting for dinner, and, indulgent to this little weakness, rose at once.

‘I must say good-night now, Minna, you will be in bed by the time I have finished dinner. will you kiss me, and say good-night?’

Minnie held up her mouth without hesitation.

‘Good-night, Aunt Fanshawe. What a very funny gentleman that must be!’

‘Yes, I am sure you will think so when you see him. But can’t you call me something else than always Aunt Fanshawe, dear? It is such a long name.’

‘It is your name, isn’t it?’ said Minnie, looking puzzled.

‘Yes, but you must find something else to call me by for short. Call me Mamma. Mamma is so much shorter than Aunt Fanshawe.’

‘But you are not mamma,’ reasoned Minnie. ‘Mamma is mother’s name, only I say mother instead.’

‘Never mind, dear, call me mamma, it is so much shorter.’

‘You are not mamma,’ obstinately persisted the child.

‘But you can call me mamma, can’t you?’ retorted Mrs. Fanshawe, a little sharply. ‘Come, my sweet child, let me hear you say it — Good-night, mamma.’

‘No, I won’t,’ said Minnie rebelliously.

The little mouth began to work ominously, and Mrs. Fanshawe understood that if she persisted further she would

have all the work of pacification to re-commence. So with a forced laugh she gave up her point.

‘You little funny thing! Well, call me Aunt Fanshawe or anything you like. And now good-night; Harris will give you the rest of your tea — take care she has what she likes, Harris — and at breakfast I shall come and talk to you again, and tell you what more I can remember about this clever gentleman we are going to see.’

She kissed the child again, and hurried from the room, leaving Minnie to finish her tea and question Harris concerning the wonderful gentleman who swallowed knives and made plum-puddings in his hat.

This topic, combined with hunger and bread and jam, proved so interesting that Minnie cried no more during the meal, nor indeed afterwards until she was being tucked up in her little bed for the night. Then she remembered that she had always till now been tucked up by her mother’s hands, and the absence of those hands — so kind, so caressing, and so dexterous at their task — made the hot tears flow forth anew. They continued to flow long after Harris had left her alone in the prettily furnished little bedroom leading out of the nursery — the most prettily furnished room in which she had ever slept — long after the light of the summer evening had melted into dusk, even after dusk had darkened into night.

But Nature came at last to her relief, and in pure exhaustion she fell asleep, dreaming that Amy had been changed by the clever gentleman into a talking doll.

CHAPTER VIII.

‘HARK, HOW I’LL BRIBE YOU.’

THE programme arranged by Mrs. Fanshawe was carried out in all its details next day, with general satisfaction to those concerned.

Minnie was taken to the best toy-shop of St. Austin’s, and there presented with the largest and most fashionably dressed doll to be found on the premises — one which possessed the further recommendation of emitting under certain conditions a discordant and unearthly noise, more resembling the quack of a duck than any other sound known in nature. After this purchase, and such a survey of the remaining wonders of the establishment as might be supposed to whet a desire to return on a future occasion, she was taken round to be introduced to a select circle of young friends, by whose society her aunt hoped to supply the companionship of Amy. Then came dinner, and afterwards a visit to Herr Schleitowand’s, where the child sat spell-bound with astonishment and curiosity—the marvels of the performance surpassing her wildest imaginings. There was no time to cry for home that day, even had she felt so disposed, but indeed she was far too much excited and interested to do anything except open her eyes very wide and ask a multiplicity of questions. Not that she had ceased to think of father and mother and Amy, for she was chattering about them constantly, but her thoughts of them seemed to be all coloured by the interests of the day. Instead of impatiently asking when she should return to them, she was always speculating on whether they could have seen this, that, or the other thing, and what they

would say of it if they had. Evidently she would have preferred for the present that they should come to her rather than that she should go back to them.

Aunt Fanshawe noted the change of tone, and was well satisfied. She would have been better pleased doubtless if the refrain of father and mother and Amy had recurred less frequently; but her experience of yesterday had taught her to be content with making slow approaches towards her object. Thus she did not thwart the child in speaking of the three persons who had hitherto constituted her world, nor did she commit the mistake of laying claim to any nearer and dearer title than that of Aunt Fanshawe.

That evening Minnie cried herself to sleep again—the foolish tears would break forth when she found herself in her lonely bed with no mother's face watching her—but sleep came much more speedily than the night before.

Another day followed, and another and another, and it was always contrived that Minnie should be interested and amused. Now it was a visit to the toy-shop to buy a peep-show; now it was a mysterious summons to come and look at something waiting for her in the garden—the 'something' proving to be an exquisite little Shetland pony bought expressly for Minnie's riding; now it was an entertainment given by her to her little friends, the chief feature of which was that real tea was served in china cups no bigger than a walnut-shell; now it was a magic-lantern exhibition; now a travelling circus; and so forth in never-ending variety.

Time passed on, and Minnie gradually began to bring the familiar home names less frequently into her conversation; and indeed it was not wonderful, considering how much else she had to think about, and talk about. Every now and then, it is true, she would be seized with a fit

of home sickness, and ask very wistfully when she was to see father and mother and Amy again; on which she would always be told that they were all quite well, and that father and mother would be glad to hear she was a good girl and did not fret. She found out by degrees that all her questionings and petitionings on this point did nothing to procure for her what she wanted, and slowly accustomed herself to transfer them to objects which she had a better chance of attaining.

At last she learned to fall asleep at night without crying, while in the day her laugh began to be heard without any particular pains being taken to excite it. The sound of that spontaneous, joyous laugh was like music in Mrs. Fanshawe's ears.

Weeks passed, then months, and Minnie had been living in her aunt's house for what seemed to her an incalculable period of time—so long that the idea of home, when she recalled it, appeared to be seen through a mist, as the memory of dream, while her new life, so uncomfortably strange and unfamiliar at first, had grown to be the most natural and matter-of-course thing in the world.

One day—long as the time looked to Minnie, it was in reality a little less than six months from the date of her arrival at St. Austin's—Mrs. Fanshawe called her, and asked her what she thought of getting up a ball for her little friends.

'A ball!' cried Minnie, her eyes sparkling with delight. 'A ball like what you went to last week, where they dance and play music and eat supper all night long! Oh Aunt Fanshawe, you don't mean that, do you?'

'Yes, I do, my dear. I have a list here of all the little boys and girls whom you might ask, and I find there would

be more than fifty. I would have the carpet up in the drawing-room and the floor chalked, and festoons of flowers put up over the doorways—just as I told you they had at Mrs. Robinson's. And then there would be supper served in the dining-room, and'

'Aunt Fanshawe! do you really mean it?'

'Certainly, dear child. You do your steps so nicely now that I don't think there need be any hesitation about it. Suppose we drive round to-day to Miss Styles's, and ask her what sort of dress you ought to have? I was thinking that white tarlatane over a pink satin skirt, looped up with white or pink roses—with a pretty little wreath of something in your hair'

'For me—all that for me! And you really are not joking?'

'I never was more serious in my life. Do you think that would make a pretty dress?'

'Oh Aunt Fanshawe! it will be lovely!'

'Then suppose I sit down now and write out the invitations for this day fortnight? Look here, Minna, this is my list—I have not left any one out, have I?'

The child came forward, and, leaning against her aunt's knees (all the old awe had long ago worn off), cast her eyes on a paper which Mrs. Fanshawe held before her. It was headed 'List of Guests for Minna's Ball.'

There was something so charming in the conjunction of the two last words that Minnie's delight fairly overflowed.

'Oh! how beautiful it will be!' she cried, rocking herself rapturously to and fro. 'Won't it—won't it?'

She turned her bright little face up as she spoke. The movement brought her lips within a few inches of her aunt's—a proximity which seemed to be suggestive, for, as though

yielding to a sudden impulse, she put her arm round Mrs. Fanshawe's neck and kissed her.

It was the first time Minnie had kissed her unasked, and Mrs. Fanshawe was in ecstasy.

'You dear darling!' she exclaimed, holding the child clasped to her side. 'You are very much pleased then?'

'Oh yes! Aunt Fanshawe—very much indeed,' said Minnie gratefully.

And then she tried to release herself, but in vain.

'Aunt Fanshawe—always Aunt Fanshawe! "Mamma" is so much shorter. Come, Minna dear, let it be "Mamma."'

Minnie made no answer. Aunt Fanshawe was holding her rather uncomfortably, so that she could not turn her head, and she was impatient to look over the list of guests.

'Dear child,' whispered Mrs. Fanshawe, 'it shall be Mamma—shall it not? Say "Yes, mamma," there's a pet.'

'Yes, mamma,' said Minnie. The words were breathed in a very low voice, almost as if she were ashamed of them, but they were enough for Mrs. Fanshawe, over whose face came a glow of triumph and exultation.

And then Minnie got loose, and the debate on the approaching festivity was continued with new ardour.

For the next few days all was excitement and hubbub in Mrs. Fanshawe's house and Minnie's head. Nothing was said, or done, or thought of, that had not some bearing on the forthcoming great event. As for Minnie, sleeping and waking, her mind was running on satin skirts and tarlatanes, and artificial flowers, and white kid-shoes and open-worked silk stockings, and chalked floors and ornamented doorways, and long supper-tables, as constantly as though the giving of a ball was to her the great be-all and end-all of existence.

And so indeed it is pretty certain that for the time it was. But Mrs. Fanshawe never made any attempt to moderate the intensity of her expectation.

Day after day passed on, and the preparations for the great occasion gradually advanced towards maturity. The carpet in the drawing-room was taken up, the upholsterers were getting on with the decorations, the confectioner had received his orders about the supper, little programmes of the dances had been printed on satin paper, the musicians were engaged—in fine, all the necessary machinery had been set in motion and was working bravely. And at last, on the day before that fixed for the entertainment, Miss Styles sent home the dress.

What a triumph of art it looked, to be sure, as it lay spread on the couch in Mrs. Fanshawe's bedroom, with its rose-bud trimmings and flowing folds of tarlatane well shaken out and displayed in their fullest glory! And then the exquisite little wreath made to match which had been sent home with it! Minnie could not repress a shriek of enthusiasm at the sight.

‘How beautiful! And is that really for me? I shall be grander than anybody else in the room to-morrow evening, shan't I?’

‘I should think you would, my dear; it will become you beautifully, I am certain.’

‘That it will. I may try it on, mayn't I? Shall I run and call Harris to help me?’

‘Presently, dear. But sit down a few minutes by me. I have something to say to you first. Are you attending, Minna?’

‘Yes, Aunt Fan— yes, I mean,’ answered Minnie absently,

taking her eyes with difficulty off Miss Styles's *chef d'œuvre*.

She had not yet got into the habit of calling Mrs. Fanshawe mamma, but she conceded so far as seldom or never to use the more distant appellation to which her aunt objected.

'Minna, do you ever think of home now?'

Minnie started; she had been thinking very little of home for the last few days.

'Oh yes,' she answered, hanging her head a little. 'Dear me, what *would* father and mother and Amy say if they saw me in such a beautiful dress as that?'

'You were very anxious to return to them a few months ago. What would you think if I let you go back to-morrow morning?'

'Go back to see father and mother and Amy! Oh! I should like it so much!' and the childish blue eyes glistened at the prospect. 'But . . . but not to-morrow morning. To-morrow is the day of the ball, you know.'

'I know, my dear child, and I should be very sorry for you to lose the pleasure, I am sure. But if you go at all, it must be to-morrow morning.'

'To-morrow morning! But I can't—you know I can't,' argued Minnie, looking very much perplexed. 'The ball is to be to-morrow.'

'Oh! I should manage to make excuses for you to your little friends—you need not mind on that account. There will be plenty of them, you know, and what with dancing and supper, and talking and laughing, they won't miss you much, I dare say.'

Minnie's face looked awfully blank.

'I don't know what you mean,' she said after a pause,

during which she seemed half ready to cry. 'I must be at the ball—I must wear my beautiful new dress. Tell father and mother I can't come till the day after to-morrow.'

'It cannot be managed so, my love. It is necessary you should go home to-morrow morning, unless indeed you wish to stay with me altogether.'

Minnie looked at her new dress, and the tears began to gather in her eyes.

'I don't know what you mean,' she repeated, shaking her head helplessly.

'I will explain. When you came to me first, Minna, it was arranged that you should remain here six months, and that then you should make your choice between going home and staying with me always. This is the last day of the six months; to-morrow they will have quite run out; and your—your friends will expect to hear what you have decided. So you see I must ask you to make up your mind, my dear. What shall we write to them—that they may expect you to-morrow?'

'The day after to-morrow,' said Minnie.

'That will not do, my dear. If you stay over to-morrow, you must stay altogether. But that will be very pleasant, won't it? You wouldn't like to leave me, and your pretty pony, and your doll, and your magic-lantern, and all your nice little friends here, surely? And you know you would not be able to take any of them with you.'

'What! not Shetland?' said the child ruefully. 'But I could come and see him sometimes, you know—oh! I should come very often.'

'No, you would not,' rejoined Mrs. Fanshawe a little bitterly. 'If you go, I should send Shetland back to the man I bought him from, and give away all your playthings to poor little children who would know how to value them

better than you do. You would never see any of them again. As for your new dress, I think I know a little girl whom it would just fit,' she continued with a reflective air.

'But it is mine,' said Minnie, fairly crying by this time. 'I am to wear it at the ball.'

'Yes, if you make up your mind that you will remain to live with me—but not unless. Now you know what you have to choose, and you can answer. Will you stay here always, or go home to-morrow?'

Minnie looked very hard through her tears at the new dress.

'I will stay here, and go home sometimes to see father and mother and Amy. I should like to see them sometimes.'

'That will not do either, Minna. If you make up your mind to live with me, there must be no going home to see anybody. This will be your home, and you must not think of any other.'

'Don't father and mother want to see me then?' asked Minnie with a great burst of tears.

Mrs. Fanshawe turned very red, and hesitated for a moment. She had a conscience—such a conscience perhaps as shrinks from the *malum prohibitum* rather than from the *malum in se*, but still a conscience—and though she could manage a tolerable number of white lies, a downright falsehood stuck in her throat.

'It will be a great deal better for your father and mother—and Amy too—that you should stay with me,' she answered at last evasively; 'and if you do, it will not be proper or convenient for you to see them. You have been very happy without seeing them for the last six months, I am sure.'

‘Yes, but I want to see them again for all that, and it is very naughty of them not to want to see me too.’

‘They are rather ill off, my dear, and would find you very much in their way. Besides, it is for your own good that you should live here rather than there. If you go back to them, you would be poor and badly dressed and have no pretty playthings, but if you stay with me you shall have everything you want, and be a rich lady some day—as rich as I am.’

‘And then I may go and see them sometimes—when I am a rich lady like you—mayn’t I?’ asked the child eagerly.

‘Then? Oh yes! certainly—if you wish it. Well, Minna, what is to be done? Shall we let them know that you have chosen to stay with me always, or would you rather go away to-morrow and leave me to apologise to your young friends in the evening? You need not mind about your dress—I can easily find somebody to give it to.’

Minnie looked very much frightened.

‘No, no,’ she cried hastily, ‘I will stay. I would much rather stay.’

‘My own sweet pet!’ exclaimed Mrs. Fanshawe, folding the child delightedly to her breast. ‘You are a darling lamb, and you will look like a queen to-morrow night, that you will.’

But to her disappointment Minnie was crying still.

‘Don’t cry, love, don’t cry. Look, I shall ring for Harris and tell her you would like to have your nice new dress tried on.’

The dress was tried on, and, in the contemplation of her own pretty little figure decked out in satin and gauze and flowers, Minnie’s tears gradually dried. Somehow she was not quite happy, but she had neither time nor skill to ana-

lyse her sensations, and she knew she was going to look very magnificent to-morrow evening.

As for Mrs. Fanshawe, she was very happy indeed—as perfectly happy as a victorious general who has won a battle of which he was not quite sure, and who does not trouble himself with questions as to whether his strategy has been entirely according to the laws of regular warfare. For she knew now that Minnie was altogether hers; and Minnie had been ten times more to her during the past few months than ever had been all the Blenheims and parrots and pet-parsons and benighted heathens whose aid had hitherto supported her in the struggle with the tedium of existence.

CHAPTER IX.

WILD PRIMROSES.

THE next day John Haroldson was sitting by the fireside in the farm-house kitchen, resting his chin moodily on one hand, and with the other nervously fingering a bit of crumpled note-paper which lay crushed together in his palm.

It was the paper on which Minnie had copied out in large round-hand characters a neatly expressed little note composed for her by Mrs. Fanshawe, to the effect that she had been offered the alternative of returning to the farm or remaining permanently under her aunt's roof, and had decided on the latter course as the one most conducive to her happiness.

‘Unnatural, hard-hearted child!’ he muttered, and clenched his hand so tightly that the crushed paper rustled. ‘She never cared for us, not she. The fool I was to expect her home again!’

He had expected her home again confidently up to that morning—having, either from natural sanguineness of disposition or sheer cowardice, shut out all other possibilities from his calculations. Latterly he had even been counting the days and hours remaining of the period at the end of which, as he undoubtingly believed, she would be restored to him. And in proportion to the strength of his hope was the bitterness of his disappointment.

‘A fool indeed!’ he went on—‘a green ignorant fool. To be taken in by her kissing and her crying and her pretty clinging ways—to believe they meant anything more than just “Good-bye, I’m off.” And she may be off for me; she may make her home where she likes so long as it isn’t in my house. A cold, unnatural’

‘God bless her wherever she may be!’ broke in Mrs. Haroldson.

They were almost the first words she had spoken since the letter had arrived. Assuredly the blow had fallen on her no less sorely than on her husband, but she had breathed no syllable of reproach against her child.

Captain Pullyn—returned a few days before from the first voyage he had made since his misfortunes—had sat watching the scene hitherto in silence, but interposed at this.

‘God bless her, I say too, and steer her safe through the breakers—there are plenty of ’em ahead of her—poor little soul. Jack, you’re as big a fool as you call yourself, or you wouldn’t be thinking harm of the pretty creature for what’s no fault of hers. You may as well call it her fault that she’s six instead of sixteen. It ain’t unnatural what she’s done; it would have been unnatural if it had been anything different—as unnatural as an old head on young shoulders, or a three-decker’s guns aboard a fishing smack. If you

cut a little craft like that loose from her moorings, youv'e no business to be surprised that she drifts away from you.'

Mrs. Haroldson cast a grateful look at the captain; from her inmost heart she felt bounden to him for taking Minnie's part. And yet his words wounded even while they comforted. They exonerated Minnie, but by implication they blamed the parents who had exposed her to the temptation to which she had succumbed. The mother accepted the blame, feeling that she had deserved it, yet it cut her to the very soul notwithstanding.

But John Haroldson was not to be appeased by any argument of the captain's. He had set his heart upon the child, and his affection was as sensitive as it was deep.

'She never cared for us,' he insisted, 'she never cared for us. But I've found out my mistake, and there's an end of it.'

Mrs. Fanshawe was giving herself some uneasiness all this time lest Minnie's father should repent his bargain, and seek to enforce the claims which law and nature gave him to the possession of his child. She would have been vastly relieved could she have looked into his thoughts, for she would have known then that his feelings towards Minnie were no longer those of love and longing, but of a settled displeasure which was the best guarantee for her own undisturbed enjoyment of her newly acquired proprietary rights.

Meanwhile, for Minnie herself things were going on charmingly. Cognisant neither of her father's anger nor of her aunt's fears, she was able to give her whole mind to the extraction of as much happiness as possible from the long-looked-for festival got up in her honour. This went off to perfection, Minnie being the admired of all admirers, and,

in right of her toilet no less than of her quality of hostess, the acknowledged queen of the ball-room. So complete were all the arrangements, and so merry was the humour of the company, that she even enjoyed herself not very much less than she had expected, never thinking once of father and mother and Amy, or of the price she had paid for the evening's pleasure. The next day she had a headache and was rather fractious, but she had not yet learned sufficient inductive logic to draw any moral from the circumstance on the hollowness of social pleasures in general and of balls in particular.

Time sped onward, and Minnie became more and more oblivious of her old life, and more and more at home in her new one. Week followed week, and month followed month, and at last father and mother and Amy had dropped altogether out of her conversation, and almost out of her memory. And if by chance something occurred to bring them and her old home to her remembrance, the once familiar scenes and figures—utterly incongruous as they were with all the analogies of her present life—rose before her so hazy and phantom-like that it was difficult to believe she had ever seen them and lived among them in the waking world.

One day—it was nearly two years since the grand Fanshawe carriage with its powdered attendants had carried her off weeping from the garden-gate whence a gentle face looked smiling after her—she was rudely reminded of the reality of that past which had grown to look so dim and visionary by being told that her mother was dead.

She was old enough now to understand what death meant—old enough to understand that the gracious phantom-like image which at times flitted before her mind's eye had

become a phantom indeed, never by any possibility to be made real again in this world. She knew that the vision of those loving eyes beaming tenderly upon her, of those soft arms opened for her to nestle in them, must continue a vision for ever now; that the dream of the past must remain in the past always, with no hope of being renewed. And, knowing this, her grief was very bitter—bitter enough to make Mrs. Fanshawe, who vainly strove to comfort her, almost jealous of her poor sister's memory.

Mary Haroldson's unspoken presentiment had indeed been fulfilled. Her husband, though broken in spirit and fortune, had long ago grown hale and strong again; but since Minnie's decision had been made known to her, she had gradually pined and faded—ailing with no specific malady, but week by week becoming paler and thinner. At last she fell ill with a low fever which was prevailing in the village, finding its victims chiefly among the old and infirm; and her enfeebled frame sank under it at once. She knew from the first that she was ill beyond hope of recovery, and would have petitioned her sister for leave to see Minnie once more—the privilege would have almost reconciled her to death—only that she feared infection for the child, and so resigned herself to die without that parting look for which she yearned. On her death-bed she prayed God fervently for both her children, but her last breath was spent in blessing the one who had so long been absent from her.

It was a terrible day for John Haroldson, that on which his wife was taken from him. Those who were with him in the first hour of his bereavement, and saw the vacant stunned look on his face, almost feared that his reason must give way under the stroke. But he eluded their vigilance, and got away from them to Captain Pullyn's lodgings,

whither little Amy had been sent to be out of the reach of infection. The captain saw at once what had happened in the blank, stony stare with which he entered, and hastened forward with a few words of inarticulate sympathy.

‘Yes, she is dead,’ said Haroldson in dull mechanical tones, looking at his friend as though he scarcely knew him. ‘Mary is dead.’

He sat down with his arms folded, and his gaze directed drearily into space. At this moment little Amy, who had heard the sound of her father’s footsteps, came toddling towards him out of a back room, intent on asking when she might go back to mother. He caught her by the arm, and drew her somewhat roughly to his knee, looking into her face the while with eyes that shone almost fiercely in their sharp searching scrutiny.

‘I have nobody left but you now. *You* will never go away to let your father die alone, will you?’

Amy lifted up her dark eyes, and fixed them upon him wonderingly. There must have been something in his expression which made her feel that the question was a solemn one, for her look grew very grave, and her voice was strangely earnest, as she answered:

‘No, I never will.’

Her father took her in his arms and strained her with passionate vehemence to his heart. And then, for the first time since his wife’s death, tears came to his relief, and he wept on the child’s neck as though he were a child himself.

As has been said, the blow which carried desolation into her old home fell very heavily upon Minnie also. It was long before she recovered the natural tone of her spirits—long before Mrs. Fanshawe felt secure against being scandalized by an apparently causeless gust of tears and

sobs, afterwards explained by Minnie herself to have reference to poor dear mother whom she was never to see again. But at last time and the constant petting of her aunt assuaged the violence of her sorrow; and gradually it, and almost the remembrance of it, faded away, as was perhaps only natural. For there was no external incident to re-open the wound or retard its healing, the girl from that time forth growing up without hearing a word to remind her of her old home. And the memory of that old home, as a necessary consequence, fled further and further into the past, until at length it was hardly distinguishable in the distance.

Yet, strange to say, at the rare moments when the scenes and associations of her childhood were accidentally recalled to her, they always shone through the mists of time with ineffable brightness and pleasantness. Anything that reminded her, were it only for an instant, of her old life was peculiarly grateful to her. The smell of wild primroses, for instance, would lap her in a momentary elysium, for it brought back a time long ago, when she had gathered primroses with her father and Amy in fields greener and sunnier far than she ever saw fields now. There was a golden halo about the past which was wanting to the present, wanting even to that less distant past which followed the date of her arrival under Mrs. Fanshawe's roof.

The cause of this difference of colour between the old life and the new she had never tried to discover; perhaps she was hardly conscious that any such difference existed. If she had thought about it at all, she would probably have ascribed her feelings to the illusions of childhood, for assuredly it would never have occurred to her that she could really have been happier in that old despised life which she knew

to have been so poor and mean than in the new life which was so comfortable and so altogether as it should be. But whether she was conscious of it or not, a difference of colour did exist between her views of past and present—such a difference as there is between poetry and prose, sunshine and shade; and whether she thought of it or not, a real reason for the difference existed also. And the reason was this, that her affections—that part of us which gives the appreciation of poetry and sunshine—had been nourished then, and were starved now. At home she had loved her father and mother and little sister with the whole force of her nature, whereas there was nobody to love with the whole force of her nature at Mrs. Fanshawe's. It is true that she liked her aunt—her mamma as she called her now—very much, and even believed that she loved her as a daughter should love a mother. But in this belief she was mistaken, for Mrs. Fanshawe, being a woman incapable of feeling any very profound affection herself, was also incapable of inspiring it in others.

And therefore it was that among all Mrs. Fanshawe's gay parterres and carefully tended conservatories there was no flower half so sweet to Minnie as wild primroses.

RAYMOND'S HEROINE.

Part II.

M I N N A.

CHAPTER I.

RESTITUTION.

THE scene was again the little garden before Black Moor Farm, and the season was again spring.

Fifteen years had passed since the sunny spring evening that Mrs. Haroldson, with Amy at her side, had watched her husband and little daughter returning to her across the moor. But the time was morning now, the woodlands that formed so pleasant a back-ground to the farm-house and neighbouring village being bright with the shimmering of young green leaves, and harmonious with the warbling of many-voiced birds. And instead of the graceful woman and joyous child that had stood at the gate that evening, there was only in the garden now a gray-haired man working among the flowers. The gray-haired man was John Haroldson—his person still showing traces of the old burly strength and vigour, though with a furrowed face and stooping figure

that made him look not fifteen but thirty years older than of yore.

The alteration in him contrasted strangely with the almost unchanged aspect of his surroundings. The inanimate objects about him looked nearly the same as they had done formerly—the moor as bleak and barren, the farm-house as cosy and substantial, the garden as trim and nicely kept, the village with its green setting of foliage as picturesque. Altogether a local Rip Van Winkle who had fallen asleep fifteen years before would, on awakening now, have found wonderfully few changes to perplex him. For Hollsworth was a slow little place, not apt to march with the times, and even the railway which now connected it with St. Austin's had as yet failed to inspire it with the go-ahead spirit of its contemporaries.

While John Haroldson was occupying himself with his flowers, a figure which he might have observed had he been less intent on his task was advancing towards him along the road which led from the village to the farm-house. He was too busy to notice it, but if he had, he might have known it even in the distance for that of a stranger; for the inhabitants of Hollsworth and its environs had lived long enough among each other to detect a non-resident at once, were it by nothing else than gait and bearing. And the person now approaching the farm had something in both gait and bearing very sufficiently distinguishing him from any of the dapper village shop-keepers or uncouth countrymen who were the most frequent passers-by in that neighbourhood.

Not that there was anything about him that could properly be said to be peculiar, his appearance being simply that of a well-dressed, well-made man, with a powerfully framed figure a little over the middle height, and a grave

dark-complexioned face. This was shaded by hair of a rich deep brown, scarcely distinguishable from black; and the eyes—the only feature of the countenance that on a nearer inspection could be called remarkable—were dark, penetrating, and singularly lustrous. The stranger was in reality about three or four-and-thirty years of age, but from the staid, almost stern, expression habitual with him might easily have been taken for half-a-dozen years older.

As he came from Hollsworth towards the farm, he seemed to be in deep meditation, walking along with an absorbed absent air which made him look reserved and perhaps a little churlish. At least so thought a group of pretty country lasses who met him on the road, but whom, in spite of the inquisitive looks of laughter-loving eyes and the whispering of silvery voices, he passed with no more attention than if they had been a flock of sheep going to market. On the other hand, he was not too much engrossed to notice the trouble of a little dot of a child that was trying to scale a stile into a field where some elder companions were at play, and lifted it over with a smile that made the grave face look quite other than it had been a moment before.

He walked thoughtfully on till he came to the gate of the farm-house garden. Here he stopped, and looked about him a little uncertainly until his eyes fell on the figure of John Haroldson stooping among his flowers.

‘This is Black Moor Farm?’ the wayfarer asked with a slight inclination of the head. ‘I wish to speak for a few minutes with Mr. Haroldson.’

The farmer rose and held open the gate, eyeing his visitor curiously the while.

‘My name is Haroldson, sir. Step inside, if you please.’

There is nobody there, for Amy—that's my daughter—has just gone out to do her marketing.'

He led the way into the kitchen—comfortable and well-ordered as of old—and set a chair for the new-comer, still evidently at a loss as to what business could have brought him. The latter noticed the questioning look, and said in answer:

'You will not wonder what I have come for, Mr. Haroldson, when you hear who I am. My name is Lee—Raymond Lee. I suppose you have received the letters I have written to you lately?'

The farmer did not reply. He had turned very pale, and fell heavily into a chair as if unable to support himself. The visitor did not remark his agitation, and went on:

'I have written several times, as you know, and, not having had any answer, have made it my business to call at Hollsworth this morning and discover what had become of you; I was afraid you might have moved from the neighbourhood. You see I am impatient, Mr. Haroldson, but I cannot help it. I shall not be happy until I have made you such restitution as lies in my power.'

'I want no restitution,' said the farmer hurriedly, and he spoke with lowered eyes as though not choosing to confront those of his interlocutor. 'There, there, that will do; let us forget all about it. Forgive and forget, that's the best way.'

Raymond Lee shook his head with a faint smile—a very bitter one it was.

'It is easy for you who have done no wrong to forget, but not so easy for the—the wrong-doers, or those who represent them. My father'—a flush started to his brow as the word passed his lips—'my father did a great injury to you

and others who trusted him, and I have the right to repair as much of it as I can. I am not able to make up to you and them what he lost for you by mismanagement, any more than I can compensate any of you for what he may have caused you to suffer; but I can at least—and I will—restore the sum of which he actually robbed you.'

His lips closed sternly over the words, and, drawing forth his pocket-book, he took out a little bundle of notes, and pushed it towards the farmer.

'Mr. Haroldson, there is your share of the sum lost to the Company by my father's frauds. You will find it makes six hundred pounds. I should have sent it to you weeks ago if you had answered my letters.'

'No, no,' exclaimed the other in a shaking voice, pushing the notes back again; 'I don't want your money, and I won't have it. I never complained about it, did I? and I don't see why you can't leave me alone as I have left you.'

Mr. Lee looked surprised, but answered calmly:

'Simply because my father stole money which I have set my heart for years on paying back to the uttermost farthing. And I have paid it back now,' he added with a short breath of relief—'yours was the only unsatisfied claim left.'

'Claim! What do you mean? I never made a claim on you in my life—you know I never did. Take your money back; I will have nothing to do with it.'

'But you must have to do with it,' said the visitor, and his voice was very severe in its emphasis. 'The money is yours, and if by its repayment I seek to wipe a stain off the name I am unfortunate enough to bear, you have no right to hinder me. I think I may ask you what *you* mean, Mr. Haroldson. Others have not refused to receive their money back, and why should you?'

‘Because—because . . . I have no particular reason of course,’ answered the farmer, stammering in some confusion. ‘But I am able to do without it, and don’t want to hear of it again. You are in business, it will be useful to you. So—so—take it back—we’re quits.’

The blood rushed into Raymond Lee’s dark face.

‘You are very unjust, Mr. Haroldson. You despise me and affront me for a crime which I have never committed, and which I am doing my best to expiate.’

‘No, no, it is not that—upon my word, it is not that. I respect you, I think you have behaved splendidly, but’ . . .

‘There is your money, Mr. Haroldson. I am glad to hear you have so good an opinion of me.’

The farmer was about to answer, but just as he had taken up the notes to force them back upon the donor, Mr. Lee’s tall figure had passed him, and was striding across the threshold. With an inarticulate exclamation of surprise, he rose to follow, and hurried down to the garden-gate, but too late—the visitor had departed and would not be recalled.

John Haroldson returned to the house with a brow more clouded than it had been for years. It was as though he had felt a new burden laid upon him, or an old one re-imposed. He flung the little packet of notes on the table with an impatient movement of the hand, as though shaking himself free of an object of disgust. Then, with a heavy sigh, he threw himself into a chair by the fireside, and sat morosely watching the smoke as it curled up the chimney. The visit he had received that morning must have recalled old associations strangely, for, as he sat, his thoughts were manifestly busy with the far-off past.

He had remained thus upwards of half-an-hour wrapped in dismal reverie, when a familiar step crunching on the

gravel walk made him look round. An old man, who waved his stick cheerily as he caught Haroldson's eye, had opened the gate, and was coming up the little garden towards the house. It was Captain Pullyn, showing the marks of time in the creases of his rosy apple cheeks and the whiteness of his large frill-like whiskers, but hale and hearty, and looking as if there were plenty of life in him yet. He had taken his final leave of sea-faring now, and had been settled for some time in his former quarters at Hollsworth, feeling more at home near his old friend than anywhere else.

‘Well, Jack, I have come to take a look at you you see. So you have got your money at last, hey?’

‘How do you know that?’ said Haroldson, and turned moodily towards the fire again.

‘How do I know?—how do you think? Why, I had a visit from young Lee myself this morning—came to inquire if you had changed your latitude or walked the plank, or what else had happened to you, that you had never taken any notice of his letters. I suppose he thought I was a good person to come to, as he knew I wasn't shy about answering questions. When he wrote to me six weeks ago to ask what bank I should like four hundred pounds paid into, I told him at once. No nonsense about me, I flatter myself. So he wouldn't let you hang off any longer, I suppose?’

‘There is the money—he left it behind him,’ said Haroldson, sullenly. ‘But I told him I didn't want it, and I don't.’

‘Bosh!’ commented the captain, ‘you'll find plenty to do with it, I warrant. Well, what did you think of him—a fine young fellow, isn't he?’

‘I don't know really—I did not notice.’

‘Didn't you? More's the pity then, that's all. But I can tell you, Jack, he's a splendid chap—so clever and long-

headed, and not a grain of pride in him for all he's such a big man in the world. What do you think, now, of him remembering little Joe, and wanting to see him again?'

'Oh indeed!'

'Yes indeed,' rejoined the captain, rubbing his hands gleefully. 'As he was sheering off, I took the opportunity, which personally I never had afore, of thanking him for what he did once for my boy Joe, when he boarded the two big 'uns that were for running him down at school. He didn't know what I meant at first, but I brought it to his mind presently, and he laughed, and said, "Was that your Joe?" says he, "I remember him, and a fine little lad he was" (which he was and no mistake), "and what is he a doing of now?" he says. So I told him he was with Brown Brothers at St. Austin's, and giving great satisfaction, and he seemed quite pleased to think of the little fellow he knew at school being in the same town with him; and, says he, "you must give me his address, captain, I should like to see him sometimes." Which I did of course, and my opinion is that he'll be a friend to Joe for life. What do you think of that, hey?'

'I'm sure I can't say. I don't want to hear anything more about him.'

'Come, come, mate, that ain't fair, 'pon my word it ain't. Bygones are bygones, and you mustn't be always fishing 'em up again. This young fellow never did you an ounce of harm in his life, and as for the father, you can afford to let him bide where he is, which is under ground most like by this time.'

The farmer bent down to push further into the grate a cinder which seemed on the point of falling, but managed so awkwardly that three or four others came rattling out instead.

‘Why, what makes you think that?’ he asked, with a short laugh at his own clumsiness.

‘Well, it looks like it, don’t it, seeing that he has never been sighted since the day he cut his moorings fifteen year ago. Not but what he’d do his best to keep himself close, and, being such a deep ’un as he was, there’s no saying that he mightn’t succeed. But anyhow he’ll never trouble you again, you know.

Haroldson gave another of his short laughs.

‘No, I should think not. Ha! ha! what an idea!’

‘And therefore I say it’s a confounded shame you should bear so hard on a fine young fellow like that, for no fault in the world but for being his father’s son. An honourable open-handed chap, that no sooner comes into property but he rakes up people he never heard of, and pays ’em money they no more expected to see again than’ — the captain paused for a moment to find a suitable figure — ‘than if it had been hid at the bottom of the Devil’s Coal-cellar,’ he added, triumphantly.

Surely the farmer was very clumsy to-day, for at this moment the poker, which he had been mechanically balancing between his finger and thumb, clattered noisily down on the hearth.

‘You are driving me stupid with your chatter,’ he muttered angrily, after a few seconds’ pause.

‘So I see,’ said the captain, with imperturbable good humour. ‘Come, Jack, don’t lose your temper, whatever you do. I should have thought it would have been all fair weather and fair winds with you this morning, after getting such a heap of money.’

‘Money, money — what do you mean by always talking to me about money? What did I want with his money? He

comes with his bits of tissue-paper, and thinks he has made all clear on his side of the account, does he? But he hasn't, confound him — no indeed he hasn't. I've lost a wife and a child through his father's means — can he give me back them, I wonder? Not that I want the girl again, though — Lord forbid — a cold, hollow-hearted' ..

'There you go again, there you go again — it's the poor little un's turn now. I declare, Jack, I don't think you've got any reasonableness left.'

'Then God forgive them that knocked it out of me. And they want to make amends with money, do they? money! It is all right now, they think — their side stands quite clear. But I can tell them the balance is against them yet.'

And as he spoke, he absolutely trembled with excitement.

'Yes, yes, who says it isn't?' answered the captain, soothingly. 'He never thought to make it all up to you, Jack, how could he? But six hundred pound is six hundred pound, and that's better than nothing, anyhow.'

'Better than nothing, is it? It's the same as nothing to me — I won't touch a penny of it.'

'Fol de rol de lol. Try some one else with that story, Jack. It would be a good job for you and me too if we could afford to chuck six hundred pound overboard without touching a penny of it.'

'I can afford to pay my way without help from *him*,' returned Haroldson, surlily. 'If I've got a roof over my head and keep out of debt, it's enough for me, and thank God I can manage that without his money or anybody else's.'

The vaunt was not unfounded, for John Haroldson, though still poor, was no longer in difficulties. By a long course of industry and frugality he had even managed to repay the sum advanced by Mrs. Fanshawe, which that lady,

looking on it as Minnie's purchase-money, would willingly have let him retain. But he regarded it in the same light himself, and for that very reason obstinately insisted on rendering it back to the last sixpence. He had parted with his child — or rather, as he put it to himself, she had parted with him — but sold her he had not.

And now, to the discomfiture of the captain, he seemed disposed to be equally, and less intelligibly, obstinate in his rejection of the money proffered by the representative of the man who had robbed him.

'I don't want it, and I won't have it,' he summed up passionately. 'I'd throw it into the fire sooner than be a farthing the richer for it.'

He spoke so vehemently that his friend was a little apprehensive of seeing him put the threat into execution.

'It's a sin to talk of throwing good Bank of England notes into the fire while there are poor folks in the world to give 'em to,' expostulated the captain gravely. 'But you don't mean it, Jack; if I thought you did, I'd take out a writ of what-you-may-call-him quirendo against you. Look, here comes Miss Amy — I wonder what she'd say if she heard you go on so.'

Just then a tripping foot-step sounded lightly on the gravel walk. The farmer made a sudden swoop upon the notes, and thrust them hastily into his pocket.

'Not a word to her, mind. She is not to know anything about it.'

Captain Pullyn wondered at his friend's unwonted secretiveness, but did not pursue the subject further. The reviled money had been taken up and pocketed, and there, as it seemed to him, was an end of the matter. Jack Haroldson wasn't so big a fool as you might think to hear him talk.

But whether Jack Haroldson was a fool or not, three advertisements were inserted that week in the second column of *The Times* by as many of the great London hospitals, acknowledging the receipt of a sum of £200 each which had been forwarded by an anonymous benefactor.

CHAPTER II.

RAYMOND LEE.

WHILE his visit was thus discussed in John Haroldson's kitchen, Raymond Lee was making his way back to St. Austin's and his own house, which he entered while it was still early in the afternoon. It was not often that he was to be found at home during the daytime, his waking hours being mostly passed at the large gun-factory which was his place of business, and of which, after years spent there, first as clerk and then as manager, he was now sole proprietor and master. But to-day he was too much absorbed in his own thoughts to be in the mood for business, and went straight home, with hardly a glance at the gates of his work-yard as he passed them on his way.

It was not a particularly pleasant or inviting home, this of Raymond Lee's.

That which he designated home was in fact nothing but a square formal-looking mansion, standing in a desolate garden where the few flowers that were planted obstinately refused to blossom, and approached by a narrow road running between dead walls, beyond which were wood-yards and tan-yards and dock-yards and work-shops and tall chimneys, with all the other ills that the unfashionable and low-lying suburb of a busy sea port is heir to. The house

itself was good enough in its way; but, as the chief object in building it had been that it might be near the gun-factory, so, now that it was built, this was the chief recommendation it possessed. And the square formal-looking mansion, with the furniture and elderly house-keeper therein, constituted all that Raymond Lee called home, for of loving smiles or welcoming voices to greet him on his return to it there were none. But he had lived here for years, and, though it was not the abode that he might have chosen for himself, he did not think of changing it since circumstances had chosen it for him.

The master of the house did not live in the principal part of it, all the best apartments being shrouded by the house-keeper in brown holland and perpetual seclusion. A couple of rooms were reserved for his occupation at the back, a bed-room and small parlour. The latter was fitted up as library and study, the walls being lined with books, and the table covered with papers and writing materials. Two objects only there were in the room not adapted for studious uses—one of them a little work-table standing by the window, and the other a small oil portrait for which space had been left between the book-shelves, the portrait of a gentle sorrowful broken-down-looking woman, with worn features that showed traces of having once been beautiful.

It was the likeness of Raymond Lee's mother, and the work-table had been hers also.

It was towards this portrait that Raymond's eyes turned first as he entered his room to-day on his return from Hollsworth. The repayment to their rightful owners of the moneys stolen by her husband had been the most cherished desire of Mrs. Lee's heart; and, knowing how her poor faded features would have lighted up and thanked him had she

been alive to hear from his lips that the task of restitution had that day been completed, he instinctively looked towards the imaged face which was all of her left to him. But no smile of loving approbation was there—only the patient expression of silent suffering which was never to be changed now—and he felt that he was alone in the world, alone with none to rejoice with him in his successes, or to sympathize with him in possible troubles. And, grave and self-possessed though he was, the feeling was very oppressive to him.

For he had not been intended by nature to go through life without a friend. What there was of gloom and sternness about him had not been always there, though circumstances had so ingrained it that it now seemed a part of himself.

Just at the age which perhaps does more than any other to form a young man's character—between eighteen and nineteen—the great blow of his life had fallen, driving him back upon himself at the time when a healthy nature is most sanguine and expansive, most confident of its own resources, most hungry for external sympathy. He had gone to Oxford full of high hopes and high spirits, indulging in splendid visions of scholarly success and reputation—for his tastes and ambition both pointed in that direction, and the family means were sufficient to secure to his abilities a fair field—when the fatal news came announcing the ruin of his prospects, and fixing the guilt of fraud and embezzlement on his father's name. From that day forth Raymond Lee was a changed character. The high hopes and high spirits were all gone—swept away in a revulsion of feeling too strong for them to stem—and instead of the candid, open-hearted, ambitious youth, there was a grave, reserved, austere man. His whole nature was soured by bitter disappointment and a yet more bitter sense of shame—or

rather it would have been soured save for the love he bore his mother, a love which the consciousness of being her only stay and comforter rendered yet more tender and abundant. But towards all others whom he had known he had grown cold and reticent, perhaps even a little hard and cynical. His native pride made him sensitive, and it seemed to him that they all despised him for his father's misdeeds—probably some of them did—and therefore he held aloof from them, retreating, except for his mother, altogether within himself. Of his father he thought as little as he could, but, when he did, it was with peculiar bitterness. How else could he think of the man who, never remembered as a kind or loving parent, had ended by breaking his mother's heart?

Thus had Raymond Lee, from a frank high-spirited young man, become, if not exactly a misanthrope, very far indeed from a lover of his kind.

He had strict ideas of justice and duty—his loathing of his father's crime had made them almost morbid in their severity—but, while scrupulously rendering all men their legal due, he was often uncharitable and even unjust in his views of character and estimation of motives. He did not give the world proper credit for the good that was in it, and inclined to exaggerate its faults, its aptitude for cheating and betraying, its proneness to worship the exalted and forget the fallen. Had not his own father been a cheat and betrayer, and had not he himself suffered from the neglect that waits on sunken fortunes? As a matter of duty and moral obligation, he would have refused no man a service that reasonably lay within his power to confer, but he would have taken absolutely no pleasure in the act—unless indeed the person to be benefited belonged to a comparatively poor

or helpless class, and then he would have performed it *con amore*. For it was his wont to think less harshly and judge less strictly of those below himself than of those who were his social equals; it was his social equals only who had possessed the power of wounding him by averted faces and altered looks.

Since the blasting of his youthful hopes, the circumstances of his life had been such as tended to confirm rather than undo the change which at that time had suddenly produced itself in his character. He and his mother had been left in complete destitution, and it was necessary for him to renounce all the prospects on which he had set his heart, to abandon the studies in which he took a passionate interest, and find some immediate means of supporting her and himself. An uncle, Mrs. Lee's brother, who was the proprietor of a large gun-factory at St. Austin's, came forward at this juncture with an offer to receive Raymond into his establishment as a clerk, and to find room for mother and son in his own house. The proposal was eagerly accepted, and Raymond accommodated himself as best he could to the dull laborious clerk's life which at that time seemed the only one he had to look forward to, the factory and its handsome profits being destined for his uncle's son, then a mere boy and several years younger than himself. The business had little interest for one whose tastes were all studious, and his uncle was not the kind of man to make those happy on whom he felt that he was conferring a favour; but Raymond worked on steadily and uncomplainingly, with no other solace than an hour or two of the evening spent alone with his mother in the little back parlour which was considered specially theirs.

At last, after years of patient plodding, a prospect of new

fortune was opened to him by the death of his cousin at a foreign university where he had been finishing his education—an event which left Raymond his uncle's only near relative, with the exception of Mrs. Lee herself. But the old man, though now intending to leave the business to his nephew, would not part with any of his own power by admitting him to a present share in the profits, and the only advantage immediately accruing to Raymond was promotion to the post of manager at a lower salary than that for which anybody else could have been induced to perform its duties. So that, even as his uncle's acknowledged heir, he was still under tutelage and control; and, with large wealth in prospect, had to chafe under the impossibility of doing anything to fulfil the darling ambition of his mother and himself—the repayment of the sum of which his father had robbed the defunct Company.

It was a Quixotic idea enough, this which mother and son nursed in the solitude of their little back parlour, but people who lead a life cut off from the rest of the world are apt to be unpractical in some of their notions. Be it what it might, they had both got the idea into their heads; and, although the feelings which had suggested it to the one were widely different from those with which it was adopted by the other, both cherished the hope of its realization with equal earnestness. Poor Mrs. Lee had a vague fancy that by an act of vicarious expiation it might be possible to lessen the guilt of the husband for whom she still felt a lingering tenderness; but with Raymond the desire to repair the wrongs suffered by his father's victims was an impatient protest against the heinousness of his father's crime, an impulse of indignation and disgust prompting him at any cost to thrust the stigma of reflected dishonour from his own and his

mother's name. In the first days of their adversity, while he was still a youth, he had taken his resolution; and, his nature being a constant one, he had kept it steadily in view through all vicissitudes, never, even when his fortunes were at their darkest, despairing of its fulfilment.

That fulfilment the poor mother was not destined to witness. She had died a year or two before her brother, while Raymond's wealth was still only in prospect. By her death all the pleasure he might ever have had in anticipating his independence was utterly annihilated - he was left a lonely man, without a sympathizing friend, or even a congenial acquaintance. Since their misfortunes, he and his mother had lived together almost as hermits, shunning all society except their own, as though they had held themselves plague-smitten. So, indeed Raymond had at first, perhaps not altogether without reason, believed that he and his would be regarded by the world, and had therefore shrunk with morbid susceptibility from confronting it. By the time that it was ready to receive him into favour as the future proprietor of one of the largest establishments of St. Austin's, he had contracted that habit of seclusion which is the most difficult of all others to shake off, steadily declining all overtures—and they were not a few—which were made to tempt him out of his retirement. Thus when his mother died, he was left absolutely alone, unloved and unloving; and, in spite of the brilliant prospects which others envied him, he felt that only one object remained to him worth living for.

The opportunity of accomplishing that object arrived at last. Three or four months before the day of his visit to John Haroldson, Raymond's uncle had died, leaving him sole heir to the business and the wealth amassed by it; and

his first act after entering into possession had been to set apart from his capital the sum of twenty-five thousand pounds, which, as he had found by careful study of the Company's books, represented the total amount of his father's defalcations. This money he had distributed in due proportion among the shareholders or their representatives, John Haroldson being the last to receive his portion in consequence of his own strange remissness in neglecting to answer the notices repeatedly served upon him.

And now Raymond was able to erase the last item from the long list of claims which accurately and laboriously he had made out against himself. He had brought to final fulfilment that day the object which he had been proposing to himself for years, and he was satisfied, as how indeed could he be otherwise? But in his satisfaction he was strangely sad and heavy-hearted. He thought of her who would have shared it with him once, and as he entered with his achieved purpose into the little parlour where she no longer sat to welcome him, it seemed to him that it had never been so desolate. The very consciousness of having attained the end so long striven for increased his sense of depression. Hitherto, however dull and solitary had been his existence since the death of her in whom all his affections had been bound up, he had at least had something to live for, something to hope and wait for. But now by his very triumph his object was gone from him, and life stretched before him a dreary barren waste. The spring sunshine was smiling on the world without; in the fields and woods, even in his own unfertile garden, all nature, animate and inanimate, seemed to be vibrating with the hopes and joys of a new awakening; only for him, Raymond Lee, were the pleasures of life exhausted. Exhausted already, and he had scarcely tasted of them.

He was in general sufficiently equable of mood, but he could not help being painfully affected by the sense of utter loneliness and hopelessness which pressed on him to-day; and, as he sat dreamily gazing at the portrait which was the only substitute he had for human companionship, the gravity of his expression deepened into gloom.

So absorbed was he with sad and bitter meditation that he paid no heed to a hasty footstep that suddenly made itself heard outside his door, and even an impatient tap on the panels failed to rouse him. The tap was repeated, but with the same result, and then the door was flung open, and his housekeeper entered the room breathless and panting.

The noise she made in opening the door caught his ear at last and without turning his head he asked almost mechanically:

‘What is it?’

‘Oh sir! such a dreadful thing! An accident at the factory—something blowed up in the casting, I think they say it was—and one of the men hurt shockingly. And please, sir, you’re wanted directly.’

Raymond Lee sprang to his feet—he was transformed into the man of action at once.

‘Have they sent for a doctor?’ was the only question which he paused to put.

The housekeeper answered in the affirmative, and without interrogating her further he hurried forth to the scene of the disaster.

CHAPTER III.

FIRST SIGHT.

A FEW minutes brought him to the gates of the factory. He entered hastily, and hurried across the open space round which the workshops were built — dimly conscious of hearing a querulous female voice say something about a carriage, and of seeing a quantity of ribbons and laces fluttering in a corner of the yard, but too intent on learning the state of the injured workman to feel any curiosity as to the cause of so unwonted an apparition, or even to take a second look at it.

On reaching the shed where the accident had happened, he was relieved by finding that it was by no means so serious as he had feared. The sufferer, who was on the point of being carried to the hospital, had received a few superficial burns which caused great pain, but were not extensive enough to be dangerous; and a doctor already on the spot was able to hold out hopes that with proper treatment the patient might probably in a few weeks be at work again. The master gave what instructions he could to insure the poor fellow's comfort, and saw him started on his way to the hospital, remaining behind a few minutes himself to examine the scene of the accident and to inquire into its causes.

By this time Raymond had forgotten all about the ribbons and laces, and was a good deal surprised on coming out into the yard again to find them still fluttering in the corner where he had first caught a glimpse of them. They belonged, as he now had leisure to observe, to two ladies, one of whom,

a good-looking portly matron, somewhere between fifty and sixty years of age, rested herself a little superciliously on a seat improvised out of a couple of logs of timber, holding a scent-bottle to her nose, and carrying on a low-voiced conversation with her companion. The latter was standing up close by, with her face turned towards the first lady, so that for Raymond the features were concealed; but her figure was slender and well turned, and the tightly gloved hand which carelessly swung a tiny lace-covered parasol had all the daintiness of youth and good-breeding.

‘Them ladies were by when it happened, sir,’ explained a workman in answer to Raymond’s inquiring glance. ‘They came with an order to go over the works, and had just gone in to have a look at the casting. And weren’t they frightened neither? Lord bless us, I thought the old ’un would ha’ gone into fits.’

Raymond, who, to oblige a customer or business acquaintance, would occasionally sign an order for admitting to a view of his establishment a party of sight-seers of whom he might personally know nothing, had no idea who or what these visitors were, except indeed that they were total strangers to him. However, he felt bound to show some concern for ladies who on his premises had just been subjected to fright and even to considerable danger, and, going up to the elder, he said:

‘I am sorry to hear you have been so much alarmed. You are neither of you hurt, I hope?’

‘Not in one sense,’ returned the lady languidly, removing the scent-bottle for an instant from her face. ‘But in another dreadfully — indeed I don’t know if ever I shall get over it. It has been altogether something so frightful! When I saw

that great sheet of flame rushing towards us I no more expected to come out of the place alive' . . .

She paused, overcome by the reminiscence, and again had recourse to her vinaigrette. Raymond thought of the luckless workman who had come off so much worse than this elegant lady visitor, and remained unsympathetically silent.

'Yes, what with one thing and another, I am quite upset. I was beginning to revive a little two or three minutes ago, and would you believe it, they came and carried that poor creature past on a shutter — just a few yards from where I was sitting. Such a horrible sight — it made me quite ill again. I really think they might have had the feeling to go round by another way. Can you tell me anything about my carriage?'

Raymond answered dryly that he could not, and was about to turn on his heel, quite disgusted with what he inwardly called the heartlessness of these dressed-out women of the world, when he was arrested by a soft voice, asking:

'And the poor man — what does the doctor say about him?'

The other lady was now the questioner, and as she spoke she turned her face for the first time towards Raymond. It was girlish and fair-complexioned, with deep blue eyes, delicately tinted cheeks, and a white forehead, over which there rippled a shining mass of wavy golden hair. A beautiful face it was — bright and sunny in its fresh clear loveliness; and so it appeared even now that it was shaded by an expression of sweet compassionate solicitude which made the deep blue eyes look more than usually earnest.

Raymond was taken altogether by surprise — he had expected neither the voice nor the face. A sense of momentary bewilderment came over him, such as one feels

when dazzled by a burst of unlooked-for light, and he was conscious that he made an awkward pause before replying:

‘The doctor’s opinion is very favourable indeed. There will be a great deal of pain of course, but no real danger, he thinks.’

‘I am so glad,’ said the young lady gently. ‘Poor man! to think of his going through so much in the meantime! Mamma, is it not dreadful?’

‘Very dreadful,’ said the matron. ‘My dear, mark my words — I shall suffer for this with one of my bad nervous headaches.’

‘I hope they will be very kind to him, poor fellow. Mamma, I wonder if’ . . .

The sentence was finished in a whisper into the elder lady’s ear.

‘I shouldn’t think there was any occasion, my dear — he is sure to be taken care of without that. Besides, I shall want my change to buy some eau de cologne as we pass — it is the only thing that does my head good.’

‘I have some money, mamma,’ said the young lady quickly, and her purse was already in her hand. ‘I should be very glad to give a trifle if you think it would contribute in any way to his comfort,’ she continued, looking at Raymond.

He had been busy wondering how such a daughter should have come of such a mother, and absolutely started when he found the fair face turned towards him for an answer.

‘No, no, all that is the duty of the employer,’ he replied a little confusedly. ‘And you may be sure it will not be neglected.’

Indeed it would not, for, as he spoke, he felt that his promise to the young lady constituted an obligation hardly less binding than his duty to the poor workman.

‘There, my dear, I told you so,’ said the mamma. ‘But you are always so impetuous — it is just like you. And you really have heard nothing about my carriage?’ she went on, addressing Raymond.

‘I really have not,’ he answered with some coldness. He paused; then, after a glance at the young lady, resumed more politely: ‘I am sorry you should be put to inconvenience. Can I make any inquiries for you?’

‘Oh no! thank you — we have a gentleman who has gone to manage for us. You see we sent the carriage away for two hours, being told it took that time to go over the works, but of course after what has happened I am fit for nothing except to get home as soon as possible. The man is driving up and down somewhere near, I am sure, and the gentleman is gone to find him, but is looking in the wrong place, I suppose, as usual. I never knew such a bad one as your papa is to look for anything, did you, my love? And it is so cold and miserable, waiting in this horrid place by ourselves.’

During the greater part of this speech Raymond had hardly been conscious that he was addressed, his eyes having again involuntarily wandered towards the young lady. He recalled his attention with an effort, just in time to catch the last words, and then it suddenly occurred to him that this open yard was not the place for softly bred ladies to be kept waiting in.

‘It is not right for you to be standing here,’ he said eagerly. ‘Will you not come into the office and sit down?’

The invitation was addressed to the elder lady, but it was the young one only who was standing.

‘Thank you,’ was the answer, ‘I think we will. Come, Minna, there is no knowing how much longer your papa may keep us waiting.’

Raymond led the way across the court to the dingy one-storied brick building which contained the counting-house and private offices. Passing through the former, where a couple of clerks were sitting at work, he went up to a door which communicated with an inner room.

‘Oh dear! shan’t we be intruding?’ said the elder lady, pausing with a simper as she caught sight of the inscription on the brass name-plate. ‘It is Mr. Lee’s own room, I see, and I know he does not like company.’

‘He will not object,’ said Raymond briefly. He saw that she took him for one of his own subordinates, and was a little vexed as he thought that her companion probably shared the error, but was too proud, and perhaps also too awkward, to correct it.

‘What a dark dismal little room!’ remarked the lady of the vinaigrette as she sank exhausted on the first chair which presented itself.

Raymond looked round. Yes, the room was dark certainly; the window was small, and there were buildings outside which partially intercepted the light. He had often enough thought it dark himself, and remembered the time when it had chafed him sorely to be condemned day after day to sit at work in it. And yet it did not look exactly dark just now.

‘It is a funny little place, to be sure,’ said the young lady, taking a rapid survey with her bright blue eyes. ‘Dreadfully grim and business-like, is it not? And oh! mamma, what a woful look-out! That great oppressive dead wall—I wonder if it leaves a morsel of blue sky visible.’

She steered her way round the high desk to the window, her silks and ribbons rustling against the heavy office furni-

ture like the plumage of a beautiful bird against the bars of a cage too small for it.

‘Only the least little scrap,’ she pronounced, as she looked up dolefully. ‘How can any one endure it, I wonder?’

Raymond Lee stood by and watched the while.

It was a strange sensation for him to see this bright fair-haired girl peering and prying about his room, with which she looked almost as much out of keeping as a butterfly which might have perversely strayed into its musty fastnesses from far-away flower pastures. The gloomy chamber which was so drearily familiar to him seemed to change its aspect altogether as she fluttered round it—so entirely that, though he recognised every separate piece of furniture and other such detail, he felt as though the place were altogether new and fresh to him, and could not help wondering a little sadly whether with her departure it would again become dull and prosaic as formerly. Once and once only the dark office-parlour had looked pleasant to him before, when his mother had come to pay him a visit there, and made it seem friendly and home-like by the mere fact of her presence; but in the natural course of things the charm had long ago been rubbed off again by hours of solitary uncheered toil. Still the apparition of to-day was so very bright and unreal-looking that it was difficult, while it lasted, to believe in the natural course of things. When one sees a sunbeam dancing on a landscape hitherto known only in cloudy weather, the change is so great that one can hardly imagine the scene given back to sunlessness.

‘I hope you feel better now, mamma,’ said the young lady, bringing her peregrinations to a close by settling herself on an antiquated horse-hair arm-chair near the window. As she dropped into it, Raymond remembered that it was the same

on which his mother had sat the day he had entertained her here, and without knowing why, felt pleased that the young lady had chosen it.

‘A little better now,’ was the languishing response. ‘But I don’t know what I should have done if I had not been accommodated with a seat in-doors.’

‘We have been very fortunate,’ said the young lady, and she smiled softly towards Raymond, as though thanking him.

How wonderfully bright and beaming that smile was! It had been so entirely unexpected that he was a little confused, but managed to stammer forth in answer:

‘I am very glad to have been of service to you.’

In saying this, however, he stupidly looked at the younger lady instead of the elder, and consequently received a reply from neither.

For some moments there was a pause, which did not appear to embarrass the two ladies, but which Raymond felt to be very awkward. Quite unconscious that they were receiving his hospitalities, they evidently did not consider themselves under any obligation to enter into conversation with him, while for his part he was too little a man of the world to know how to make a beginning without assistance. It would have been easy for him of course to go away and leave them to themselves, as was probably expected of him, but somehow he did not care for going away just then.

He was presently helped out of his dilemma in a way he had not expected. One of the clerks who had been writing in the outer room put in his head to announce:

‘Oh! if you please, sir, here’s a gentleman come to say that the carriage is waiting.’

And through the half-open door Raymond saw a tall, bald-

headed, grey-whiskered gentleman, with whom he had occasionally had dealings in the way of business, and who, as he now remembered, had asked the other day for an order to admit himself and two ladies to view the factory.

‘How do you do, Mr. Fanshawe?’ said Raymond, more cordially than he had ever greeted that gentleman before. ‘Step this way, please, the ladies are resting in my room for a few minutes.’

‘Ah! Mr. Lee, is it you? How do?’ And with two fingers extended, being the warmest salutation he was ever known to bestow on any one, Mr. Fanshawe entered the room where Raymond had accommodated his visitors.

‘Mr. Lee!’ exclaimed the elder lady, and she turned towards Raymond with a look of unfeigned surprise. ‘So it has actually been Mr. Lee himself whom we have had the pleasure of speaking to all this time! I had no idea—had you, Minna? Henry, my dear, pray make Mr. Lee acquainted with us.’

‘It is my wife, you know,’ said Mr. Fanshawe, looking very much embarrassed by the task laid on him. ‘Mr. Lee—Mrs. and Miss Fanshawe.’

And, having thus gracefully acquitted himself, he eagerly subsided into his native obscurity.

‘We have to thank you so very much for your kindness,’ went on Mrs. Fanshawe to Raymond in her most friendly tones. ‘I don’t know what would have become of us without you—really I don’t.’

Raymond bowed gravely—his natural staidness of demeanour rarely allowed him to appear other than quiet and composed.

‘You have nothing to thank me for—I am only sorry to have been able to do so little.’

‘Nothing to thank you for!’ cried Mrs. Fanshawe, holding up her finger in playful remonstrance. ‘As if I did not know what a privilege it is to be admitted into your own private room! And we were sadly in the way, I fear—ladies always are. Did you not find us so, Mr. Lee? Now speak the truth.’

‘Indeed not—I assure you,’ said Raymond, in a tone of more earnestness than seemed necessary; but he was looking at the younger lady as he spoke, and felt strangely anxious to rebut the imputation.

‘Well, it is very kind of you to say so. And to think we never so much as thanked you—it must have seemed terribly rude. But it is your own fault, you know; you never give your neighbours an opportunity of making your acquaintance, and cannot expect to be recognised. Why do you make such a hermit of yourself?’

‘It is half-past three,’ murmured Mr. Fanshawe timidly from a corner. ‘And I have an appointment at four.’

‘I am coming, Henry, but I must first try to make Mr. Lee promise that he will let us see him occasionally. Now you will, Mr. Lee, won’t you?’

‘I never go into company,’ said Raymond, half mechanically. This was the stereotyped answer which he made to all such overtures, and he made it now according to his rule, but even as the words passed his lips he half regretted that his rule was so very absolute.

‘Oh! but I won’t hear of any excuses. Come, Mr. Lee, it isn’t fair, really, that you should not give us an opportunity of returning your hospitalities. After the pleasant morning we have spent here—at least I don’t mean that, for of course it has been very dreadful and heart-rending, but it would have been pleasant, you know, under other circum-

stances—after all the kindness you have shown us, I should say—it would be positively shabby to withdraw and never let yourself be seen or heard of again. You must fix a day for coming to us, upon my word you must. Now when do you think will suit you best? We are expecting a few friends to dinner this week, on—let me see, what day, my love?’

‘The day after to-morrow,’ said the young lady. ‘It will be Wednesday, you know.’

She half turned her head towards Raymond as she added this explanation. The movement seemed almost unconscious, but he could not help noticing it, and feeling that she had endorsed the invitation.

‘Yes, Wednesday—you are quite right, dear. Will that suit you, Mr. Lee? Come, I am sure you can’t object—it is to be quite a quiet, friendly affair—only three or four besides ourselves. You can’t say no to that, can you?’

He could neither say no nor yes for a few moments. It was such an unheard-of thing with him to go to a dinner-party that it seemed out of the question to accept, and yet, when he came to think of it, he did not exactly know why he should not. In his indecision he glanced in the direction of the young lady. She had been looking towards him, and for an instant their eyes met.

‘Well?’ persisted Mrs. Fanshawe. ‘Silence gives consent, and you will come, won’t you?’

‘You are very kind,’ he replied with an effort. ‘As you wish it, I will.’

‘An appointment at four,’ groaned Mr. Fanshawe despairingly.

‘Very well, Henry, I am quite ready. Goodbye, Mr. Lee—we shall be so delighted to see you. Seven o’clock on Wednesday—don’t forget.’

Raymond shook his head and smiled. He did not say it, but he knew that the sense of being under an engagement to a dinner-party was a great deal too novel and too oppressive to admit of forgetfulness.

Mrs. Fanshawe gathered the folds of her shawl around her, and the rustling silks and gauzy tissues which for a while had filled Raymond's room with incongruous brightness fluttered out of it again. He did not stay behind to contemplate the effect of their disappearance, but followed the ladies to their carriage, which was waiting for them at the factory-gates. Here a friendly farewell was said, Mrs. Fanshawe shaking hands with her new acquaintance very warmly, and the young lady following her example, though a little timidly and undecidedly. And yet his fingers retained the sensation of her light touch longer than that of Mrs. Fanshawe's cordial grasp. Then there was a great deal of packing and adjustment of drapery, and a great deal of smoothing and shaking out of lace trimmings; but at last, to Mr. Fanshawe's infinite satisfaction, the whole party was safely stowed, and the carriage rolled off, leaving Raymond to look after it and wonder what infatuation had taken hold of him that he stood committed to a dinner-party on Wednesday.

'Well, I am quite pleased he is coming,' said Mrs. Fanshawe, as soon as they were in motion. 'I think we have made a real acquisition, eh, my dear?'

'I don't know—I suppose so,' said Minna carelessly, twiddling with the tassel of her parasol.

'And we may take it as a wonderful compliment that he did not refuse point-blank. I never heard of his going into company before. Though I know several people who have tried to get him to their parties, but he has always held

back. How surprised they will be when they hear of his being at our house! It is really something extraordinary.'

'What an odd person he must be!' said Minna, re-adjusting the tassel, which she had nearly pulled off.

'He must be rather eccentric, I suppose, but it does not show so much as you might expect. I had always imagined him to be a kind of barbarian, or I should not have been so long to-day in finding out who he was. It was rather stupid of us, though, for he is much too gentlemanly for a clerk or anything of that kind. You thought him very gentlemanly, didn't you?'

'Oh yes! he was gentlemanly,' said Minna indifferently, as though referring to something in the far-away past which had altogether ceased to interest her.

'He is good-looking too,' said Mrs. Fanshawe, with a critical air. 'Yes—for a man—decidedly good-looking.'

There was a pause, but Minna did not take the opportunity of making a remark.

'I suppose he is very well off,' went on the lady, looking at her husband. 'His business is first-rate, I believe?'

'First-rate,' said Mr. Fanshawe with an unwonted gleam of enthusiasm. 'Wonderful paying concern—quite wonderful—and lots of ready money. Why, he paid away thirty thousand the other day as if it had been so much water—money he didn't owe a farthing of. Very unbusiness-like, you know.'

'Oh yes! I heard about that—something connected with that horrid father of his, wasn't it? An honourable feeling on his part, no doubt, though I can't see myself that there was any call for such a thing. But the fact of his being able to afford it shows he must be very rich.'

‘He is rich,’ said Mr. Fanshawe emphatically. ‘Pretty near the richest man in St. Austin’s, I should think.’

Still Minna made no remark. But secretly she was very glad to hear what Mr. Fanshawe thought.

CHAPTER IV.

BEFORE THE GLASS.

MRS. FANSHAWE’S adopted daughter—Minnie Haroldson formerly, Minna Fanshawe now—was at this time just twenty-one years of age.

The promise of her childhood had been more than fulfilled, and Miss Fanshawe was by common consent the reigning beauty of St. Austin’s. But to the surprise of all her friends and acquaintances, she remained Miss Fanshawe still; and, in spite of numerous admirers, had completed her twenty-first year without pledging her hand to any of them.

The truth was, she, and Mrs. Fanshawe for her, could afford to be fastidious, and, knowing it, felt themselves in no kind of hurry. If Minna’s heart had been touched, she might not perhaps have been able to be so solidly sensible in her views, but hitherto it had been altogether quiescent in the matter. When a girl is brought up to see a great deal of society, especially if she is beautiful and early seasoned to adulation, she is not apt to surrender her affections to the first comer. It is the plain girls, those to whom a soft word or lover-like attention is as manna in the wilderness, who are most given to be romantically impressionable; and even in their case susceptibility gets its edges wonderfully rubbed off by contact with the world and the

habit of seeing a constant succession of new faces. So that Minna, thoroughly versed in society and accustomed from childhood to receive admiration as her right, was comparatively safe against having her head turned by the homage of an individual adorer, and had passed fancy-free and heart-whole through the fire of innumerable sieges. And being thus under no interior compulsion or impulsion, she was content to wait before making her selection.

Mrs. Fanshawe preferred to wait also. She was determined that when Minna married it should be somebody whom all the mothers of St. Austin's should envy her for having secured as a son-in-law, and no one had yet presented himself who in her eyes came quite up to the prescribed standard of eligibility. Nor did she much regret the delay. Naturally she was not very impatient to part with any share in the adopted daughter whom she had been at so much pains to obtain, and whose companionship had proved the most effectual cure for ennui she had ever tried; and indeed she would probably not have endured the notion of any change in the present state of things save for the spirit of rivalry inspired by the example of others. But she looked round and saw other mothers of marriageable daughters busy in disposing of their girls to the best advantage, and felt that she would be eternally disgraced if she did not succeed as well for her beautiful Minna as the most skilful and fortunate chaperon of them all. And thus it was a settled thing in Mrs. Fanshawe's mind that, though there was no particular hurry about it, Minna should one day make a match of peculiar excellence.

Without any spoken explanation or overt interchange of ideas, Mrs. Fanshawe's views on this subject were fully understood and fully entered into by the young lady herself.

That she should in due time marry, and marry well, was a thesis which, though she had never enunciated it or heard it enunciated, Minna never dreamed of doubting. Not that she cumbered herself greatly about the matter, but thus much she took for granted simply because she never thought of contemplating the possibility of anything different. Other young ladies got married, or else were pitied for not getting married; and, as the idea of being pitied was not to be harboured in Minna's mind for an instant, it followed that she would get married too. Then, as to the high external qualifications of her future husband, whoever he was to be, they were equally a matter of course. Other young ladies tried to secure for themselves by their marriage as much wealth and as good a position as possible, their success being usually in the ratio of their own attractiveness; and Minna, having reason to know that her attractiveness was very great, could not doubt that her success would be proportionately splendid.

Perhaps it showed a want of originality of intellect that she never asked herself if this kind of success would really be most conducive to her happiness, but Minna did not set up to be an original thinker, and it had not occurred to her to consider the question. She knew the kind of marriage that would be pronounced by family and friends a 'good match,' knew that she was expected to make a good match, and never thought of doing otherwise. The possibility of marrying a poor man and being happy with him had never entered her head in her wildest moods of speculation; and if it had, she would forthwith have dismissed the notion as a hypothetical infraction of her duty to society, to herself, and to the adopted mother who had rescued her from poverty as a brand from the burning. For though Minna's love for

Mrs. Fanshawe unwittingly fell far short of that which a child ought to bear towards a parent, she had a great idea of how much she owed her. Often when she saw a girl of her own age shabbily dressed and under-educated, she would almost shudder to think that this might have been her case too, and would inwardly feel very grateful to dear mamma.

It will be seen that Minna loved the world and the good things thereof. But then she had been taught to love them, and must not be too harshly judged for having learned her lesson. And, whatever her faults were, she was not altogether without virtues. If she was worldly, she was not heartless—though these are adjectives which usually go together. She had learned to be a fine lady, and to prefer purple and fine linen to serge and fustian; but she had not learned to be selfish or cold-blooded, and would have dressed all mankind in purple and fine linen if she could, without stopping to inquire by what hands the future manufacture of those becoming fabrics was to be carried on. She was fundamentally good-natured, and not even the long course of spoiling she had undergone had been able to make her otherwise. Her very attachment to her own privileges rendered her pitiful and tender-hearted towards those who could not share them. She was of the earth, earthy, in her exaggerated appraisement of the wealth and refinement which had fallen to her lot—fancying indeed that life must be a kind of blank without them—but she would have been willing and glad that all the world should be as affluent and refined as herself; and she had this of Heaven in her that she had a heart always ready to be moved with a tale of distress.

On the day appointed for Raymond Lee's first appearance in the Fanshawe mansion, Minna dressed for dinner with peculiar care, showing such indecision as to which colour and material best became her, and such fastidiousness in the disposition of her hair, as to render her maid's task much more than usually difficult. And even when her assistant had departed and her toilet was nominally complete, she was not content without a readjustment of its ornamental adjuncts, trying on one set of jewels after another, holding her pretty head first on this side to judge the effect of the emeralds, and then on that to catch the flash of the brilliants, and altogether looking a very image of perplexed deliberation.

At last she believed that she had found the exact kind and degree of decoration which best suited her; and, satisfied that the art of personal adornment could no further go, let one hand fall negligently by her side, held the other slightly lifted with a lace handkerchief gracefully pendent from it, and stood before her glass in complacent contemplation as a painter before his favourite picture.

For Minna was not one of the young ladies, if indeed such there be, who, possessing charms, are unconscious of them. She was beautiful and vain of her beauty—that is to say, she valued it highly, perhaps unduly, as she valued other glittering externals. But if in this she erred, she erred in common with a countless multitude of others, and with a better excuse than many. Had she not an instinctive sense that her beauty had procured her the favour of her aunt and set her in the position dear to her? and was she not warned by the same instinctive sense, that, her beauty lost, the tenure on which she held her other privileges would be, if not destroyed, at least sadly weakened?

She had always known herself to be beautiful and been glad of it, but to-day she seemed more glad of it than usual. A soft happy flush mantled on her cheeks as she gazed which could hardly have been caused by any amount of mere self-admiration. And indeed, though more than ordinarily interested in her mirror just now, it was not altogether of herself and her beauty that she was thinking. If she had put her thoughts into words and uttered them as they arose (but she would not have been heard talking such nonsense for the world), they would have run something in this strain:

‘I am looking very well to-day—really very well indeed. He will think so too, if he has any eyes at all. He is sure to come—oh! of course he will come—he doesn’t seem like a person who would break his word. Yes, uncommonly well, certainly—so much better than the other day with that dowdy bonnet. I don’t think I will ever enter the woman’s shop again—she had no business to give me those common flowers. But they say men don’t observe things of that sort—very likely he never saw them. How stupid he must be! Then perhaps he won’t notice how beautiful my white arm looks with the coral bracelet. Well, never mind; it will help the general effect. And so he is actually coming to dine with us—he who never was known to accept an invitation in his life before. “I never go into company;” those were his very words. And it is quite true, for we never met him anywhere. Very strange that he is coming, really. It can’t be to please papa; he is too rich to care about pleasing anybody—the richest man in St. Austin’s, papa said. And yet there must be some reason, one would think. I wonder what it is.’

And then the soft flush on her cheeks grew deeper, and

her bright lips parted in a self-conscious smile. She had made a theory of her own as to the reason, and the theory pleased her.

As has already been said, Minna had not hitherto shown herself susceptible, but in Raymond Lee she was undeniably interested. He had been the means of gratifying her vanity, and of gratifying it in an altogether new way. She had heard her praises spoken, till praises palled upon her ear; she had seen herself followed and worshipped by young ball-room dandies, till her appetite for their admiration was cloyed. But she had never yet seen what she saw now—a staid mature man (he looked almost middle-aged to her), of reserved tastes and demeanour (dreadfully stern she inwardly pronounced him), break through a life-long habit for the sake of a few hours of her society. The idea that she was the cause of so extraordinary a revolution as that implied in Raymond Lee's promised appearance at a dinner-party was a new sensation; and its novelty re-acted in his favour by making her think of him with an interest she had never yet felt in any one, and look forward to his coming with strange inquisitive expectancy. She wanted to see him again, and find out whether he was really so grave and thoughtful as he had seemed the other day; above all, she wanted to know how he would bear himself in her presence and what he would say to her.

But the dinner hour had nearly struck, and it was time to put an end to this pleasant communion with her mirror. She threw off her reverie with somewhat of an effort, and, having once more satisfied herself that nothing was wanting to the completeness of her toilet, turned away and issued from her room—a warrior armed cap-a-pie bound for the field of battle.

There were some half-dozen people sitting and standing in the drawing-room as she entered, but Raymond Lee was not yet among them— she knew that at once, even before she had time to take note of those actually present.

As Mrs. Fanshawe had said, the party was to be a very small one, and with the exception of Raymond it was already assembled. The Fanshawes seldom gave dinner-parties, Minna having all a young lady's aversion to such ponderous festivities; and when they did, which was generally when Mr. Fanshawe wanted to please some business friend, it was almost always on a small scale. To-day it was a Mr. and Mrs. Hodgetts who, from Mr. Fanshawe's point of view, were the principal guests, and in whose honour the party had been originally proposed—Mr. Hodgetts being a sleepy-looking man of the heavy-father type, and Mrs. Hodgetts a stout well-meaning lady in amber-coloured satin, who was decidedly not good style, but who was just tolerated in the Fanshawe circle for the sake of her husband. To talk to Mr. Hodgetts a Mr. Tomlinson had been invited—a gentleman in the heavy-father line also, whose chief characteristics were plenty of hard cash and a turn for enunciating with peculiar unction gloomy views on financial and all other matters. Then, to counterbalance all this coarse commercial element and give a flavouring of fashionable refinement to the gathering, it had been considered necessary to secure the company of Mrs. Vesey and her daughter, the latter now developed into a tall dashing girl of some three or four-and-twenty.

It was not often indeed now that Mrs. Fanshawe had a party which was not graced by these ladies, they receiving the material advantages of unlimited ice and champagne in return for the aristocratic sanction imparted to an enter-

tainment by their presence. It is true that there was not much love lost between the two matrons, or the two young ladies either for that matter; but each set was useful to the other, and each deemed it desirable to keep up the appearance of a friendship a good deal warmer than was really felt. The task was difficult occasionally on both sides. Mrs. Vesey's temper had suffered by years of painful striving to get the greatest possible amount of show out of small and gradually diminishing means; while Arabella's, poor thing, had been soured by a succession of matrimonial disappointments; and the spectacle of Mrs. Fanshawe's easy affluence and Minna's uncared-for conquests was sometimes almost too much for them. At such seasons they were apt to take viperish pleasure in remembering their own superior social status (for Mrs. Vesey still managed to retain a sort of footing in exclusive county society where the merchants and merchants' wives of St. Austin's were yet scarcely recognised), and gave themselves airs of patronising condescension which galled dear Mrs. and Miss Fanshawe not a little. Under these provocations Mrs. Fanshawe kept her temper admirably, all things considered; but as for Minna, she was often on the point of open rebellion, and in spite of all her good-nature was conscious of disliking her friends very intensely.

On entering the drawing-room to-day, Minna seated herself by Mrs. Vesey because a chair happened to be so placed that she could not have avoided taking it without rudeness. But she had not been conversing with that lady five minutes when she made an excuse for getting away again, and presently she had glided up to where Mrs. Fanshawe sat talking to Mrs. Hodgetts.

'Mamma,' whispered Minna, taking advantage of a pause

in the conversation, and Mrs. Fanshawe knew from the tone of her voice that she had come to disburden herself of a grievance.

‘What is it, my darling?’ was the sympathizing response, unheard by Mrs. Hodgetts, who had fortunately become interested in some very dispiriting remarks of Mr. Tomlinson on prevailing meteorological influences.

‘Oh! mamma, that horrid Mrs. Vesey! No, don’t look at her, or she will know we are talking of her, and I couldn’t bear her to imagine that she has vexed me. What do you think? She has been asking me if we are invited to Lady Fitz-John’s *fête*, and then pretending to be so sorry that she won’t have the pleasure of meeting us.’

‘Nasty creature!’ commented Mrs. Fanshawe, a little more emphatically than usual, for the entertainment in question was one to which she had made great interest to be invited, and not without some faint hopes of success. ‘Then does she mean to say that the invitations are issued already?’

‘Of course,’ answered Minna pettishly, ‘and is boasting at no allowance of having got one for herself and Arabella. And oh! mamma, it is so provoking.’

‘It is strange certainly,’ said Mrs. Fanshawe musingly. ‘But never mind, dear, where there are so many to ask, the invitations can’t be all made out at once, you know. There is plenty of time still—more than three weeks yet. I believe Lady Fitz-John makes out the list of guests herself, and I should say that on such an occasion, when everybody is anxious to welcome home the young heir, a mother would be very careful how she created invidious feeling by omitting any family of the slightest local importance.’

And Mrs. Fanshawe drew herself up as if she thought her importance was very great, and almost more than local.

‘Mrs. Vesey’ must have been very sure of her ground before she asked the question,’ said Minna ruefully. ‘Horrid, spiteful thing—she would never have wanted to know if she had thought there was a chance of our going. Oh! mamma, is it not’ . . .

She stopped suddenly, conscious that the door had just been thrown open and that on the threshold appeared a tall dark figure which was that of Raymond Lee.

CHAPTER V.

SOCIETY.

YEARS had passed since last Raymond Lee had entered a room where guests were assembled; and though he knew himself to be sufficiently familiar with social usages to be in no danger of committing any specially glaring solecism, he was aware of an inner confusion and perturbation which no one would have suspected under his calm and composed exterior. His brain was, as it were, in a whirl, and there was a kind of haze before all his senses which prevented him from being more than dimly conscious of mechanically advancing amid a hum of voices to shake hands with Mr. and Mrs. Fanshawe, and with a radiant creature in bright apparel from whom all the light in the room seemed to emanate, and whom it appeared absurdly prosaic to call or even to think of as Miss Fanshawe.

His thoughts had been in strange turmoil for the last two days. He could hardly understand his own acceptance of Mrs. Fanshawe’s invitation, and had hesitated almost up to the last moment whether he would not after all do well to get out of the engagement with an excuse, and to forget the

episode of the other day as a foolish dream out of all harmony with the waking conditions of his life. But then he remembered—and the remembrance came as a bright and welcome suggestion—that the conditions of his life now were other than they had been. He had kept out of society hitherto because he had felt ashamed of showing his face in it; but now that he had marked his abhorrence of his father's misdeeds by taxing himself to repair them, what cause had he to feel ashamed more? So far as he had been disgraced by what was never fault of his, the disgrace was wiped out now by his own voluntary act of reparation; and he was free, if so it pleased him, to resume his rightful place in the world. Since those outstanding six hundred pounds had been paid to John Haroldson, he had been the equal of other men, free to go where they went, to do as they did, ay, if he chose, to compete with them on even terms for any the highest prize he might feel a mind to win. And, arguing thus, he had decided to go to Mrs. Fanshawe's dinner, partly as an act of self-assertion, partly out of a strange undefinable curiosity to see more of the bright butterfly creature whose gay wings had whisked so incongruously the other day through his dull office-parlour.

And now he was actually in her presence again, and found its effect still the same, making him feel dizzy and bewildered, as though dazzled with excess of light.

Presently—before it was necessary for him to say more than the few matter-of-course words of greeting which rose mechanically to his lips—there was a general rustling of ladies' dresses, and creaking of gentlemen's boots; and Raymond, still in a kind of dream, found himself going into the next room with a lady on his arm who had been introduced to him as Mrs. Vesey. He had lost sight of Minna for the

time being, nor did he find her again at the dinner-table, where he took his seat between his hostess on the one hand and Mrs. Vesey on the other, with a row of unknown faces fronting him. But soon he heard a low silvery laugh sounding from his own side of the table two or three places further down, and he knew that the light-beaming presence was not far off.

He was conscious of nothing at first save this fact, and the disagreeable prevalence of an inarticulate noise compounded of the buzz of tongues and the tinkle of knives and forks. But gradually, as the novelty of the situation wore off, the Babel of sounds began to resolve itself into separate and distinguishable elements, and he was able to follow with tolerable exactness what was being said.

It was a pity that he listened, for in a very few minutes he became disgusted and even angry with every member of the party save one. He had been so long out of the world that he had forgotten how difficult it is to keep up a conversation among casual acquaintances which to an attentive critic, especially if he be one who himself takes little or no part in it, shall not sound supremely shallow and inane. He forgot that it was necessary for those people to say something, and almost equally necessary that they should choose some subject of common interest—the fashions or a small bit of social gossip for the ladies, the funds or the rate of discount for the gentlemen, the weather as an occasional rallying-point for both sexes; and he was too mercilessly sweeping and bitter in his inferences as to the empty-headedness and empty-heartedness implied in the selection of themes and the mode of treatment.

The more he listened, the more the misanthropical spirit of censorship was stirred, and, with his contempt for the

meanness and narrowness of soul which to his thinking nearly every remark betrayed, his indignation waxed also. The latter feeling was unreasonable doubtless, but he could not help it when he thought how the prate of those coarse material-minded worldlings must sound in the ears of the pure ethereal being whom he could not see, but whose voice occasionally reached him like a breath of soft music. It seemed to him a kind of profanation that this sordid frivolous small-talk should be going on in the presence of her whom he knew to be sitting yonder in all the glory of her clear sunny beauty—her who was so manifestly different from the rest in the unworldly freshness of her nature that the only wonder was how she could have grown up among them. For the very bitterness of his scorn and almost hatred for the others tended but to brighten the ideal to which they served as foil; and Minna never looked to Raymond so nearly perfection as now when he sat fuming with silent contempt and dislike for her friends and family.

Surely if they could have known his feelings, the Hodgetts and Veseys and the rest of them would have had great cause to complain of the unjust partiality of his judgments. The conversation was certainly not very brilliant or improving, but neither in point of morality nor of intellect was it conspicuously below the average of dinner discourse in general; while the slight share contributed to it by Miss Fanshawe would hardly have suggested to an unbiassed listener that there was any particular profanity perpetrated by holding it in her presence. Take, as an example, the last quarter of an hour which preceded the withdrawal of the ladies, and it cannot be said that Raymond heard anything to justify the state of suppressed wrath and indignation into which he had lashed himself.

MRS. FANSHAWE. Well, I never thought her pretty, did you?

MRS. VESEY. Decidedly plain, in my opinion.

MRS. FANSHAWE. She called the other day in one of those new-shaped bonnets. I suppose it did not become her, for I thought her looking so old.

MRS. VESEY. She can't be very young now, you know.

MR. FANSHAWE. The last quotation was twenty-eight to twenty-eight and a half.

MR. TOMLINSON. You'll see it won't be above twenty-three next time. Such things are sure to come down with a run.

MRS. HODGETTS. Do you like the new shape?

MRS. FANSHAWE. I hardly know; so much depends on the trimming.

UNSEEN DIVINITY. Well, for my part, I like all the fashions this season. And as for the new colour, I am quite charmed with it.

MR. TOMLINSON. Mark my words, it won't last. My opinion is . . .

MRS. HODGETTS. Law now, Mr. Tomlinson, do you really think it won't? I've been told it was so wonderfully fast.

MR. TOMLINSON. (*Looking at her sternly in resentment of the interruption.*) I was referring to the present unexam-pled activity of tallow.

MRS. HODGETTS. Tallow! Ugh! how nasty! About the new colour, as I was saying, the only objection to it is, it don't become all complexions.

MR. TOMLINSON. It will drop—see if it don't drop.

MR. FANSHAWE. Looks firm for the present, though. Help yourself, Mr. Hodgetts.

MR. HODGETTS. Thank you, I don't mind if I do. Good port this.

MR. TOMLINSON. Very fair, very fair. (*Holding his glass up with an air of satisfaction.*) Do you know they say that after five years more there won't be another drop imported?

MR. HODGETTS. (*Startled.*) How so, how so?

MR. TOMLINSON. Something wrong in the vines, they say. Yes (*with increased cheerfulness*) 'it's a bad look-out, but you may take my word' it is the deficiency of ozone that is at the bottom of it all. My belief is that a gradual deterioration of the atmosphere is taking place everywhere. Look at the weather to-day, you can't call it natural, can you?

MRS. FANSHAW. Well, it has been rather warm for the time of year, certainly.

MRS. VESEY. Very fatiguing weather I call it. And Arabella and I have so much to do just now—I can't tell you how tired we are. We were at St. Cecilia's Hall all morning superintending the arrangements.

MRS. HODGETTS. The bazaar is to be the day after to-morrow, isn't it?

MRS. VESEY. Yes, and you can't imagine how many little things there are to be thought of now that the time is so near. I am sure if it was not in the hope of doing some trifle of good, nothing would ever induce me to undertake a stall—nothing. I am quite worn out, and so is that poor girl, are you not, dear?

MISS VESEY. (*Smiling faintly, and pressing her hand for an instant on her brow to still its throbbing.*) It is of no consequence, dear mamma. Only a bad headache.

MR. HODGETTS. A capital investment, depend upon it. One of the best things going.

UNSEEN DIVINITY. I suppose it will be a very gay affair.

MR. FANSHAW. Five-and-twenty per cent.

MRS. VESEY. Oh! everybody will be there. Those little hand-screens of yours look so nice, Miss Fanshawe. I expect to have quite a crowd of competitors for them.

MR. TOMLINSON. Very fine, very fine, but what do you call the security?

UNSEEN DIVINITY. I think the design is rather pretty. Mrs. Wilks saw them before they were sent off, and was so pleased with them that I have had to do another pair just like them for her stall.

MRS. VESEY. Poor Mrs. Wilks! what an odd person she is! (*Turning to RAYMOND graciously.*) You are going to patronise us, I hope, Mr. Lee?

RAYMOND. (*Stiffly.*) Patronise you! In what way?

MRS. VESEY. Why, the bazaar to be sure. Oh! Mr. Lee, you can't mean to say you don't know about the bazaar.

MR. HODGETTS. The last transaction was at a hundred and thirty.

RAYMOND. I never heard of it till this evening.

MRS. VESEY. Not the bazaar to be held at St. Cecilia's Hall next Friday and Saturday in aid of the Conversion of Old-Clothesmen in the Metropolis Fund? Well, Mr. Lee, you do surprise me. But you will go, won't you?

RAYMOND. Certainly not.

MRS. VESEY. Not? And why?

RAYMOND. My best reason is that I do not approve of bazaars.

MRS. VESEY. Oh fie! Mr. Lee—what harm did they ever do you?

RAYMOND. No harm to me, but no good to anybody else.

They are a machinery for getting pleasure under false pretences, and false pretences are never right.

MR. FANSHAW. Up at a premium just now.

MRS. VESEY. False pretences—what hard names! But surely, Mr. Lee, if there is a way of combining one's own pleasure with the benefit of others it must be so much the better, must it not?

RAYMOND. Not at all, juggling with charity and amusement is not so much the better, but so much the worse. It can't be good to treat the act of helping a poor neighbour as a pill which has to be sugared over before it is palatable.

MRS. VESEY. A pill! He! he! how funny! I beg your pardon, Mrs. Hodgetts—you were speaking to me?

MRS. HODGETTS. I was asking if you were aware—no more, thank you—if you were aware of a trustworthy person you could recommend as coachman—with a good pair-horse character, you know. Ours nearly overturned us the other day, and considering (*a little magniloquently*) that we pay the highest wages, it is rather hard we should be treated so. Such a one as you have would just suit us—so steady and respectable-looking. Let me see, it isn't you though; it must be Mrs. Jackson—you don't keep a carriage, I think.

MRS. VESEY. (*Smiling with amiable malignity.*) No. I wish I could help you, Mrs. Hodgetts, but good servants are the rarest articles in the world now-a-days. As Lady Fitz-John was remarking to me the other day, the *nouveaux riches* have quite spoiled the market.

MRS. FANSHAW. (*Secretly resentful.*) They are very scarce, certainly. But you must not complain, Mrs. Vesey, you have always been so fortunate. What a nice young

man that was you had some time ago! By the way, what made you part with him?

MRS. VESEY. (*Who, as MRS. FANSHAWE perfectly well knows, has recently made a forced descent from a genteel young man out of livery to a small boy in buttons.*) He was a good servant, I must say. But unfortunately I discovered that he was rather—well, how shall I put it—rather given to take more than was good for him, you understand. And when once a young man takes to that, there is not much hope left for him, in my opinion. It was better to get rid of him.

MRS. FANSHAWE. Oh! of course—quite necessary.

MRS. HODGETTS. (*Who does not understand French, and has been impressed with the familiarity of the reference to LADY FITZ-JOHN.*) You are well acquainted with her ladyship, Mrs. Vesey?

MRS. VESEY. Our families have always known each other. But, as you are aware, Lady Fitz-John has been a great deal out of England during her son's minority, so that for years we have had no opportunities of meeting.

MRS. HODGETTS. A beautifully furnished place, I believe?

MR. HODGETTS. Lord Fitz-John's? They say the cellars are the best stocked in the country.

MRS. HODGETTS. They won't hold out long if all tales are true. Do you know anything about that, Mrs. Vesey?

MRS. VESEY. About the cellars?

MRS. HODGETTS. No, no, about the young lord, I mean. Do you think it can be true what they say of his being so unsteady?

MRS. VESEY. Well, I don't know. We must not be too severe. People exaggerate so.

MRS. HODGETTS. I must say it looked very bad his stopping abroad last year when he came of age. Everybody expected him home to take possession and show himself to the tenantry, and especially after the old place had been let so long to strangers—it would have been only right of him.

MRS. VESEY. It would have been better of course. But . . .

MRS. HODGETTS. They say he was at some horrid foreign gambling-place all the time. Do you think that is true?

MR. TOMLINSON. Baden, to my own certain knowledge, and at the gaming-tables every night. I saw him there myself—when I was passing through, you know. A dreadful thing!

MRS. HODGETTS. Poor young man, how sad!

MR. TOMLINSON. He takes after his father, you see—no head for calculating odds. It won't be long before they have to put the estate into nursing again if he goes on at this rate. It's in the blood, I suppose.

MRS. HODGETTS. How very, very melancholy!

MRS. VESEY. Oh! but we must hope for better things. Even if he has been a little wild it is never too late to mend, you know, and now that he is at home he is showing every disposition to do his duty. This *fête* next month is to be a splendid affair, I hear.

MRS. HODGETTS. (*Who has no expectation of being invited.*) Is it? Well, I wish they mayn't spend more on their housewarming than they can afford, but I suppose Lady Fitz-John will take care of that. (*Pauses a little acridly.*) I'm sure I pity her, poor thing, from the bottom of my heart, as I should pity any mother under such circumstances; still, as

you say, it is right to hope for the best, and wonders will never cease. Though I consider gambling a shocking vice, and I believe it isn't the worst thing he does, either. I don't know how true it may be, but I *have* heard he is rather too fond of (*Taps the rim of her wine-glass and nods expressively.*)

MRS. VESEY. Oh! dear, dear! what a pity such things should get about!

MRS. HODGETTS. (*Inquisitively.*) You have heard of it, too, then?

MRS. VESEY. No, no, you must not ask me what I have heard. Such a young man, you know—it isn't fair, really. It has always been my doctrine that one cannot be too lenient with young men of that age—don't you agree with me, Mr. Lee! They *must* go through a course of wild-oat-sowing and that sort of thing before settling down—mustn't they now?

RAYMOND. (*Savagely.*) I agree with you perfectly — in your admirable remark of a few minutes ago. When once a young man like Lord Fitz-John or your late footman takes to drinking and that sort of thing, there is not much hope left for him.

MRS. FANSHAW. (*With an interrogative look round the table at the ladies.*) Hem! Shall we . . .

(*Ladies all rise, and exeunt amid solemn silence.*)

It will be seen from this specimen of the conversation that Mrs. Vesey found her cavalier churlish, if not downright rude. He was indeed in most unreasonably ill humour, and with that lady more especially, having conceived a horrible dislike to her from the beginning. He had taken it into his head that she represented more perfectly than anybody else in the room the worldliness and conventionality with which

all save one were more or less tainted; and every word that passed her lips increased his prejudice against her, and his indignation that she should be allowed to breathe the same air with the pure saint-like maiden whom he knew to be sitting so near her. It was a positive relief to him when the woman was gone from his side, even though all the other ladies were gone too.

With the departure of the ladies the frivolous element dropped out of the conversation, and the sordid element became predominant. The talk was altogether of money and money-making, and Raymond sat listening, not perhaps quite so indignantly as before (for there was no unworldly spiritual-minded being present now whose ears it could offend), but with yet more disgust and weariness. He almost despised himself for enduring the company of those dull-brained heavy-souled grovellers who could find nothing better to discourse upon even in their hours of recreation than buying and selling; and was more than once tempted to invent excuse for leaving the table and the house, never to make an experiment of society again. But he thought of Minna, and forbore. He would like to see her and hear her at all events once again before returning to his exile, and therefore resigned himself to sit out the commercial slang of Mr. Fanshawe and his friends with marvellous patience.

At last the desired moment came, and Raymond found himself following the other gentlemen into the room whither the ladies had preceded them. He was immediately aware that Miss Fanshawe was seated at a side-table not far from the door, looking over a book of engravings with another lady. Yes, she was all that he had imagined — brighter and more sun-like even than his dull fancy could depict her.

The other lady was Mrs. Hodgetts, to whom Minna had

temporarily allied herself in order to spare her temper the infliction of Mrs. and Miss Vesey. But no sooner had the gentlemen entered than Mrs. Hodgetts started up to tap her Sam on the arm and ask him (he had *such* a memory for dates) whether it was three or four years ago that the Griffins returned from India, the detail being necessary to complete a story which she had been relating a quarter of an hour previously. Raymond felt positively grateful to the lady for her love of accuracy. For Minna was sitting quite by herself now, and, in moving to open a passage for Mrs. Hodgetts to her husband, Raymond was able, nay, was almost compelled, to draw some steps nearer the side-table.

Minna had never lifted her eyes since the door had opened to admit the gentlemen. But for all that, she was perfectly conscious that Mr. Lee was among them, conscious too that he had approached the table at the end of which she sat, and almost as conscious as he was himself that he was seeking something to say to her.

‘How different he is from those other creatures!’ she thought to herself as she riveted her eyes on the open page before her — the ‘other creatures’ being the young men from whom she had been in the habit of receiving incense. ‘So grand and strong and intellectual! I am sure he might be a great man if he chose.’

And yet from the moment of his entering the house that evening they had not exchanged a word.

At last he spoke, seizing the first common-place that came into his head, in despair of finding anything better worth saying.

‘Those seem to be very fine engravings, Miss Fanshawe.’

Could any of the people on whose insipidities he had been so severe during dinner have begun conversation in flatter,

tamer fashion? And he had not the smallest idea whether the engravings were fine or not — he could see nothing of them except their size. But after all, platitudes come more easily than anything else, and it is harder than one would think to be quite sincere in general society.

He was ashamed of himself for a moment, but the feeling was forgotten almost immediately. For the fair bent head was raised, and a pair of bright lips answered;

‘Yes, it is rather a nice collection, I think. Do you happen to know it?’

Diplomatic Minna! Of course Raymond could not answer the question without coming round to her side to see what the collection was. And when he was there, what so natural as that he should drop into the unoccupied chair which Mrs. Hodgetts had vacated?

‘No,’ said Raymond, after an inspection, perhaps unnecessarily prolonged, of the title-page. ‘May I look at some of them?’

And then he seated himself as might have been expected.

‘This first one is rather pretty,’ said Minna, and she was really quite surprised to find how tremulous her voice was. ‘The landscape is so well done — don’t you think so? But the next is my favourite — it is the best of the whole series, in my opinion. Look, here it is — King Cophetua and the Beggar-maid; is it not beautiful?’

‘What is it that you are admiring so much, Minna dear?’ cried a female voice behind. ‘I must positively come and have a look.’

The speaker was Mrs. Vesey, who, having heard something of Raymond’s wealth, was willing to give him another chance in spite of his churlishness. Besides, she did not choose that Miss Fanshawe should enjoy an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête*

with him while her own Arabella was sitting with nobody to talk to.

‘A charming thing really!’ she pronounced when she had put up her eye-glass. ‘What an exquisite face the girl’s is—so simple and unaffected! Quite justifies the king’s choice, eh? And that old courtier — oh dear! how scandalised he is looking! it is quite absurd. He is put in to represent the world, I suppose — the hard, cold, hollow-hearted world. But the king doesn’t mind a bit; he knows he is right, and that’s enough for him. Ah! a delicious subject — so fresh and — what do you call it — pastoral, you know. What are those lines at the bottom of the page, dear? I can’t read them from here.’

‘A motto,’ said Minna coldly, for she was highly displeased at what she considered Mrs. Vesey’s unwarrantable intrusion.

‘A motto! And what does it say? Excuse me, dear;’ and Mrs. Vesey approached her face a little nearer the page and slowly read off the following words:

‘Silver and gold, and long descent,
What do they bring of true content?

Let them be!

I seek a bride with richer store —
A loving heart, though nothing more.

This is she.’

‘Charming! quite charming!’ was again her comment. ‘A sweet idea, and so delightfully put.’

‘A loving heart, though nothing more.’

That’s the bit that takes my fancy.’

‘May I turn over now?’ asked Minna, fingering the leaf impatiently. She was angry, and hardly cared to conceal it.

But though Minna was curt and Raymond scowled, Mrs. Vesey still kept her ground and her temper.

‘Turn over? Oh yes! certainly; I am quite ready. And what is the next pretty thing you have to show us? Petrarch and Laura — ah! very well done too. By the way, have you seen anything of Laura Brown since her marriage?’

‘Not yet. I don’t think mamma intends to call.’

‘Does she not? Well, I think she is quite right — if people choose to marry into an inferior social position they must take the consequences.’

‘I suppose so,’ said Minna a little regretfully. ‘Poor Laura! I hope she is happy.’

‘Oh: I dare say they are happy enough just now, for I believe they are madly in love with each other. But how can it last, I should like to know? A clerk with two hundred a-year — a dreadful *mésalliance* to be sure. Such a shabby little house I hear they are settled in — and only one servant, of course.’

‘And is it not possible that happiness can last in a shabby little house with only one servant?’ asked Raymond, looking up with sudden fierceness. He would have annihilated the woman if he could for daring to talk thus in Minna’s presence. ‘Or is it only in poetry and pictures that we can afford to be fresh and pastoral?’

‘What is that, Mr. Lee? I don’t quite understand,’ asked Mrs. Vesey, slightly disturbed by this vehemence.

‘Nothing—nothing. It is a pretty line that about a loving heart and nothing more, but the doctrine is only to be taken æsthetically of course. A *mésalliance* in art and a *mésalliance* in real life are two very different things, and so King Co-phetua would have found out if he had worn a chimney-pot hat and a dress coat. Ah yes! the old courtier would have

had it all his own way then. A hard, cold, hollow-hearted world, isn't it?

Mrs. Vesey bit her lip; without fully comprehending Raymond's drift, she understood that she was being treated very rudely.

'I am afraid Arabella is sitting in a draught,' she said, turning away her head as though not hearing him. 'Excuse me, dear' (to Minna), 'I must go and speak to her.'

And she swept off majestically, determined to meddle no more with Mr. Lee for that evening.

'Poor Mrs. Vesey! only see how you have frightened her away,' said Minna, turning round to Raymond with one of her archest smiles.

He was penitent and humble in a moment.

'I have been very rude,' he stammered. 'I am sorry, but' . . .

'Oh! don't be sorry, Mr. Lee, pray—not on my account, at least. To tell you the truth I am rather pleased than otherwise to see her routed—she has always been a pet aversion of mine.'

'You don't like her? I am glad of it,' said Raymond warmly. 'But indeed I should have been surprised to hear that you did, she seems so thoroughly worldly and conventional.'

'I don't know about that, but I don't like her. Still I could almost have pitied her just now—you were so dreadfully hard upon her. A little too hard perhaps. For though all my sympathies were on your side, Mr. Lee, I think she might have found a good deal to say for herself if she had chosen—really I do.'

She shook her golden curls and laughed a low musical laugh. Raymond sat looking at her the while (he could not

RAYMOND'S HEROINE.

Die eingeborenen Rinde knippte fest,
An's Vaterland, an's Heer, schloß sich die Tod,
Das hatte fest an seinem Namen Hosen,
Hier sind die starken Wunden, derer Kraft,
Dort in der Fremden Welt steht der Mann,
Ein schwarzes Rohr, das jeder stehn vermag,
Eubler.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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RAYMOND'S HEROINE.

Part I.

MINNIE.

CHAPTER I.

BLACK MOOR FARM.

A GABLE-ROOFED, lattice-windowed house, small and antique, but not the less solid and comfortable, flanked by a labourer's cottage on one side and by a range of diminutive out-houses on the other, with a tiny flower-garden in front and a dark-green background of trees rising up behind—such was Black Moor Farm five-and-twenty years ago.

A smiling place enough in itself, but unfortunate in the prospect it overlooked. For the gate at the end of the pretty flower-garden opened on a flat, dreary expanse of moorland, which only a scanty covering of grass and a few clumps of furze-bushes redeemed from utter sterility. This was the Black Moor, thus styled from that peculiar darkness of soil which tells its tale so plainly to those who have travelled through the coal districts of the North of England. A sullen, desolate waste this same Black Moor was—a place where Nature seemed to be in perpetual mourning over the buried

fertility of a ruined world. In its black eerie barrenness the plain appeared wider than it was; in reality not much more than a mile and a half can have intervened between the farm and a straggling row of deserted, half-ruined-looking cottages, which skirted the opposite or north side of the moor, and behind which rose a long low line of hills shutting in the horizon.

For any one versed in the local annals, the grimness of the scene was increased tenfold by the sight of those tenantless dwellings with their smokeless chimneys and broken windows. The Black Moor has a tragic history, and yonder empty cottages, while they stood, were ghastly mementoes of it. A coal-pit was worked here once, and those said cottages, built for the occupation of the pit-men, promised to become the nucleus of a large village, possibly of a prosperous town. But one day the miners were surprised at their work by a sudden blast of fire-damp; some scores of men who had seen the sun shining on the Black Moor that morning saw its light no more, and the cottages were left untenanted save by weeping widows and orphans, who in a few weeks were dispersed to the four winds to seek what lot might await them in the absence of their bread-winners. The abandoned homesteads were never occupied again, the damage caused by the accident being so extensive that the works were not re-opened; and the embryo village—already ambitiously dubbed North Hollsworth, after the flourishing little township of Hollsworth on the southern side of the moor—gradually fell into ruins.

Only one dwelling continued to be inhabited—a miserable ale-house, still retaining the sign of 'The Black Man,' which it had assumed in compliment to its original patrons. The landlord was an old man and averse to moving; and though

of regular customers he had now few or none, a road ran by his door along which on market-days a sufficient number of thirsty drovers journeyed to make it just worth his while to keep his house open.

The road in question skirted the northern and western sides of the moor, joining the London road near the southwest corner, not far from the place where, in hideous blackness, yawned the entrance of the disused coal-pit. As may be imagined, this spot in particular was held in evil repute by the country folk of the neighbourhood, the pit-hole being known to them by the ill-omened name of the 'Devil's Coal-cellar.' The uninhabited cottages looming on the northern horizon, spectral-looking as they were, seemed less dreary to behold than the black abyss down which human beings had descended to meet a dark, horrible death in the hidden recesses of the earth. Even grown men, finding themselves near the Devil's Coal-cellar after nightfall, were apt to pass with bated breath and accelerated pace; while, as for the children of the district, it was very rare that they ventured near the place at all save in large bands and in broad daylight. And, so far at least as the children were concerned, the superstition which taught them to eschew the spot was a very wholesome one, since a new accident might easily have happened there. The rough fence erected round the mine when the works were closed had been gradually broken down by time and weather, and had not been replaced, so that the mothers of the neighbourhood were not unnaturally wont to view the hole as a kind of ogre's trap or pitfall set expressly for the ensnarement of their darlings. However, whether by force of instinct or parental warning, the dreaded catastrophe did not occur, and, no steed having been stolen, the stable-door continued unlocked as before.

It was about three quarters of a mile from this inauspicious south-west corner that the Farm was situated, on the south side of the moor, and directly facing the deserted hamlet of North Hollsworth. Half a mile or so further on, still following the southern border of the waste, one came upon the village of Hollsworth proper, a snug, pleasant little place, peeping out from a bushy green wood, in which it seemed to be half imbedded. It was strange indeed to see how richly this cold, desolate Black Moor was fringed with verdure along the whole of its southern boundary—a juxtaposition of contrasted barrenness and fertility only to be accounted for by a similarly abrupt diversity of geological formation. Thus Black Moor Farm and the neighbouring village of Hollsworth, sketched by a spectator on the moor, would have made as pleasing a picture as an admirer of quiet rural scenery could desire; while, on the other hand, a view taken from the front windows of the farm or village would have been pronounced, if not precisely unpicturesque, certainly not smiling or pretty.

Still, sunshine and spring weather will always go some way towards lighting up the weirdest scene; and even the view over the Black Moor might almost have been called pleasant as, on a fine evening in early spring some five-and-twenty years ago, a woman stood at the gate of the pretty flower-garden in front of the farm-house, holding a little girl by the hand, while together they looked with smiling eyes over the waste. Following the direction of their gaze, there might have been descried athwart the level sunbeams two figures, a man and a child—a little girl this also—who hand in hand came towards them across the moor.

‘See, Amy dear,’ said the woman, ‘there are father and Minnie coming back at last. Poor child! I hope the walk

hasn't been too much for her, but I could not keep her at home when she begged so.'

'Amy wanted to go too,' reproachfully pouted the little one, a tiny, brown-eyed thing some four years old. 'But mother wouldn't let Amy go—not even when father said please.'

'Because Amy isn't big enough to have her own way in everything—not even when father says please,' returned the mother fondly, stooping down to stop the child's mouth with a kiss. 'Wait till you are as old as Minnie, and you shall get long enough walks then. There, run and ask Minnie how she liked it.'

She held open the gate for the child, who ran out eagerly towards the new-comers and in half a minute more was lifted high from the ground to receive a big kiss from father. Another minute, and the three—father and daughters—had reached the gate where the mother stood with beaming eyes waiting to welcome them.

'Well, John dear, so you are back at last! I hope you have not quite knocked up my little Minnie.'

'No, he hasn't,' said Minnie stoutly, 'I'm never tired when I'm with father. I am sure Amy would have been, though, wouldn't she, father? It was such a very long way, you know, and Amy is so little.'

And Minnie tossed a graceful little head over which six winters had barely passed.

Her father looked at her proudly, and began twisting a rich golden curl round one of his large sunburnt fingers.

'Did you ever see such a puss as it is?' he chuckled exultingly. 'Why, we've walked six mile if we've walked a step, and yet the monkey won't cry tired, nor wouldn't if it was twice as far. Anything to be with father, hey lass? I carried her a bit at times, so you needn't look so scared, Polly,' he added suddenly, answering a surprised glance

from his wife. 'Lord bless you, you needn't be afraid of my forgetting what the little legs are made of.'

'I am not afraid of your forgetting anything where the children are concerned, or I either,' replied the wife, smiling up fondly into his face. 'You are a good father and a good husband, John, if ever there was one.'

'I'm glad you think so, Polly, I'm glad you think so. I try to be, God knows—and with such a wife and such children as I've got, it would be hard if I didn't succeed. But take us inside, my girl, and let us have our tea. Minnie and I are starving, pretty near, ain't we little 'un?'

He drew his wife's arm within his own, and went with her towards the house, the two children bounding before them.

They were a good-looking couple, this husband and wife—he with his manly bronzed features and powerfully framed figure, she with her gentle face and graceful feminine bearing. And yet, good-looking as they were, and happy as they seemed together, a superficial observer, unaware of the perfect love which united them and smoothed down all apparent disparities, would scarcely have pronounced them a well-assorted pair. There was a refinement about the wife, both in manner and appearance, which was wanting to the husband who—partly because he could not help it, partly from mere carelessness and defiance of the world's opinion—looked and spoke a great deal more like the rough honest-hearted yeoman than like the polished gentleman that he was not.

So far it might be said that the marriage on the part of the wife was a *mésalliance*; and indeed the same had been said pretty loudly by her friends at the time it was contracted. Not that she had come of a stock much superior to his own, but her father had made a fortune in business

of which she inherited her due share; and John Haroldson when she married him was only a farmer's son, with few worldly possessions save a handsome honest face, a warm heart, and a quick temper. The last of these speedily brought him into trouble with his wife's only surviving relations, a brother and sister, who, never disposed to look on him with favour, soon found, or said they found, that there was no getting on with him. He would not brook being advised by them, and they could not, or would not keep their advice to themselves; so, as Mrs. Haroldson always took part stoutly with her husband, all communication between her and her family had been given up for years. The brother, with his ample inheritance, had betaken himself to Australia, where he was reported to be amassing a large fortune. The sister had married a wealthy merchant of St. Austin's, a large northern seaport from which Hollsworth is not more than twenty miles distant; but in spite of their comparative proximity, the two sisters, Mrs. Fanshawe and Mrs. Haroldson, lived as estranged as though half the globe had separated them.

Perhaps John Haroldson's shortcomings might have been looked upon by his wife's relations with more lenient eye if he had succeeded better than he did in worldly matters. But somehow he was not cut out to be a prosperous man. After his marriage he made an attempt to establish himself in business, but fortune, or perhaps his own idiosyncrasies declared against his success; and when the greater part of his and his wife's joint possessions had been thrown away in the vain endeavour to gain a footing in the commercial world, he gave up the task in disgust, resolving to return to his original and more congenial vocation of farming. It was at this time that Mr. and Mrs. Haroldson settled at

Black Moor Farm, which, though very small and yielding proportionately diminutive profits, suited them better than a large place would have done, especially as their income was eked out by a yearly sum arising from the remains of their former property invested at a high rate of interest in a local joint-stock company. Here their two children were born, and here, in spite of comparative poverty and almost total seclusion from the world, the happiest years of their lives were spent.

The family had now entered the house, and were assembled in the spacious front kitchen which, save on specially festive occasions, was their ordinary sitting-room, and which looked so comfortable with its sanded floor and raftered roof as fully to justify their preference.

‘Let me see, this is Captain Pullyn’s night,’ said Mrs. Haroldson, as she applied herself to the task of tea-making. ‘I always have to allow three extra spoonfuls at least when he is coming.’

‘I forgot to tell you—you need not make tea for him this evening, Polly,’ said the farmer, looking up from the corner where he was sitting with a little daughter on each knee. ‘I met him this morning, and he was going to St. Austin’s for the day and won’t be back till dark. He’ll look in then if he has time.’

Captain Pullyn was a retired master in the merchant service living at Hollsworth; and in spite—or, as the village gossips said, because—of sundry eccentricities, was the only person in the neighbourhood on anything like intimate terms at the farm, where he regularly spent two evenings of each week.

‘And what have you and Minnie been doing all this time, John?’ asked the wife, as she set a chair for her husband

at the tea-table. 'You have not told us a word yet of your adventures.'

'Well, there isn't much to tell, is there, Minnie? Except that the folks at Stockdale Farm seemed very glad to see us, and set down Minnie to a famous feast of roasted apples while I went to look at the beasts. And regular beauties they were, Polly, and no mistake.'

'Oh yes! beauties,' said Minnie, looking up from a basinful of bread and milk. 'And white sugar to eat them with, that you sprinkled on them with a spoon pricked all over holes, just like our pepper-castor. Wasn't it funny?'

'You little goose, I wasn't thinking of your apples. It was the beasts I meant, Polly, the finest lot you ever saw, and safe to be worth two hundred pound next year if they're worth a farthing, or two hundred and fifty more likely—put it down at two hundred and fifty. So I've made up my mind to bid as high as a hundred for them (we can stand that, you know), and if we get 'em—as we are pretty sure to, for there ain't anybody likely to give as much—that will make a hundred and fifty clear profit, do you see—clear profit. And then hey for another two hundred pound in the St. Austin's Grand Consolidated General Agency Company, with a silk gown for mother and the two biggest dolls in the toyshop window for my two little pussy-cats.'

'That's me,' cried Minnie, nodding her curled head rapturously—'me and Amy. But you haven't told them yet half the things we did, father. After the apples were done and father was ready, we said good-bye and went away, and presently we got into a beautiful field—oh! such a beautiful field—where there were primroses growing. Father set me down—I had been riding on father's back, you know—and we stopped a long while and gathered the biggest

nosegay I ever saw, all for mother and Amy. They would have been so pleased with it, but I was very stupid and left it behind at the Black Man.'

'The Black Man! I'm afraid you and father are not to be trusted together. What! after the roasted apples did he take you to run up a score at the Black Man?'

'And I shan't take her there again in a hurry,' said the farmer. 'They are a deal too high and mighty for my custom, to say nothing of having to wait a quarter of an hour before you can get what you want. I wouldn't have gone there, only Minnie was thirsty and wanted a drop of water, but I little knew the fuss we should have to get it.'

'Indeed, how was that?' asked his wife.

'Why, when we got to the place, after going well-nigh ten minutes out of our way for it, there didn't seem to be a soul about. We went into the bar-room, and there was nobody there, and then into the kitchen, and there was nobody there, and after that we got poking into the very stable-yard, and there was nobody there either.'

'Except a horse,' chimed in Minnie. 'We heard him neighing, and father lifted me up to peep at him through a hole in the stable-door. A pretty grey horse he was, and turned round his head quite pleased when I called to him. Wasn't he a nice old fellow, father?'

'Yes, I don't expect it's often there is a bit of horseflesh like that at the Black Man,' said the farmer. 'Well, as I was telling you, I suppose they heard our voices at last, for presently Mrs. Underwood puts her head out of an upstairs window and calls out to know what we were doing in her yard, as cross as if we were thieves. So I told her what we wanted, and when she found it was me she seemed to get a trifle more civil, and came down with a glass of water for

the child, and I had a drop of beer for the good of the house. I said we had had hard work to get anybody to hear us, and she answered, in her sulky kind of way, that she was upstairs giving her husband his dinner, and that the stable-boy had gone home for a couple of days for a holiday—nothing for him to do, she said. And they don't take the way to get much to do, either, if they don't treat their customers better than they've done to-day.'

'It isn't poor old Reuben's fault,' said Mrs. Haroldson apologetically. 'He was always civil and obliging as long as he was able to look after things himself.'

'No, it isn't poor Reuben's fault, except that he was a fool at his time of life, with one foot in the grave as you may say, to go and marry a young wife for no reason in the world but that she had got a handsome face. Any one with half an eye might have known it wouldn't turn out well.'

'It was very foolish of him of course, but, John, we have no reason yet to say that it has turned out ill.'

'Haven't we though? Look at her eye the next time you see her, and say if you think she has got the kind of temper to be happy sitting at home nursing an old bed-ridden husband. No, it would have been a deal better for her, and him too, if she had stopped behind the tobacconist's counter at St. Austin's till she got somebody of her own age to make up to her. And it would have happened some day, I don't doubt; she was a handsome girl in spite of her black looks, and there are young fools in the world as well as old ones.'

'She was very handsome certainly, and is still. And she is quite aware of it, I fancy.'

'You are about right there, Polly. Her head was turned with admiration long before she married old Reuben; he would never have had a chance of her but that she knew he

had a trifle of money laid by, and thought maybe it was more than it is. No wonder she finds the change dull when it was only last year she had half the young men of St. Austin's coming every day to look at her.'

'No wonder indeed. Poor foolish old Reuben!'

'Ay, and married ones too, if all tales are true. Why, it was even said that Mr. Lee . . . Not that I believe that part of it, you know—a practical steady-going man of business like him don't run off the course in that manner. Look here, Polly, isn't it time these young 'uns were in bed? They have had their supper, and here is Miss Amy nodding her head off already. And Miss Minnie is beginning to keep her company, I think.'

'I ain't,' said Minnie indignantly. 'Oh! do say I may stay up a little tiny bit longer, father—just till the candles come in. I'm bigger than Amy, you know.'

'So she is,' said the farmer, looking appealingly at his wife, who stood near ready to carry off both the children for execution. 'Yes, let her stay till the candles come in—it won't be long first—poor little pussy.'

Minnie rubbed her cheek gratefully on her father's rough hand as it lay on the table, and he smiled delightedly, as though well satisfied at having earned such a reward. She was his eldest-born, this pretty golden-haired little fairy, and it was tacitly understood in the household that if there was any inequality in the love which John Haroldson lavished on both his children, the scale inclined in Minnie's favour.

Amy was roused with some difficulty, and her fat little cheeks having received one pair of reverberating kisses from her father and another from Minnie, she was on the point of being led off to her solitary bed when a ring at the door-bell sounded the signal of a respite.

‘The captain, as sure as a gun,’ cried the farmer, striking his hand on the table. ‘Run, children, see who will get the door open first.’

Amy was wide awake now, and bounded after her sister towards the door, both children animated by a manifest zeal which sufficiently proved that the crusty old sea-captain had his good qualities.

The dusk was gathering fast, but there was still light enough for the children to recognise their old friend.

‘Cap’en, cap’en,’ cried little Amy, ‘come into the kitchen, cap’en, and tell mother Amy mustn’t go to bed. Amy isn’t sleepy now.’

‘What do you think, captain,’ said Minnie, ‘I have just been walking six miles. All the way to Stockdale Farm and back. Isn’t it famous?’

But the captain did not answer, and walked straight into the kitchen without a word.

Mr. Haroldson came forward to welcome him, but even then the visitor only gave a slight mechanical salutation, and, making for his accustomed place in the chimney-corner, seated himself, still in silence.

‘Hollo, what’s up now?’ said the farmer. ‘Polly, make haste and light a candle—the captain can’t see to shake hands.’

The joke did not take, for the captain remained silent some moments longer, while Mrs. Haroldson fumbled on the chimney-piece to find the matches. At last he spoke, but even the children started as they heard his voice—it was so unlike the familiar one they were used to.

‘I have just come from St. Austin’s. You haven’t heard the news yet, I suppose?’

‘News—no,’ said the farmer. ‘What kind of news?’

‘Bad. Lord help us all, very bad. Walter Lee has gone off, and carried all the ready money of the Grand Consolidated along with him. He must have been tampering with the funds for a long time back, they say. Nobody seems to know the rights of it exactly, but it comes out pretty plain that the Company’s shares ain’t worth the paper they’re printed on.’

The light of the newly-lit candle, falling on John Haroldson’s face, showed the features pale and rigid as though they had been hewn out of marble.

‘Then I am a ruined man,’ he articulated hoarsely, and, suddenly tottering, he fell back on the chair from which he had risen to greet the captain, and buried his face in his hands with the quick spasmodic movement of a strong man in his agony.

CHAPTER II.

THE DAPPLE-GREY.

FOR two or three minutes there was a stillness as of death among the little group.

Mrs. Haroldson, pale and trembling, sat looking at her husband without strength to speak to him a word of comfort; and the two little girls, vaguely understanding that a great calamity had fallen upon the household crept up to her side in mute awe-struck wonderment. At last the captain broke silence.

‘Come, mate,’ he said kindly, clapping his broad palm on Haroldson’s shoulder, ‘you mustn’t take on like this. Think of your wife and children, and bear up for their sakes if you can’t for your own.’

A convulsive quiver shook the farmer's burly frame from head to foot; it was precisely because he did think of his wife and children that the blow had fallen upon him so heavily.

'Yes, yes, it's very hard, I know, but you must keep your colours flying for all that. Only look what a young man you are compared to me, and every penny I've got, pretty nigh, is gone the same way. Little I thought ever to go afloat again, I promise you, but I must now. And there's my boy Joe whom I'd set my heart on bringing up for a gentleman and a scholar—and he's got the stuff for it in him if ever a little chap had—he must go to a cheaper school now, or p'raps none at all. It's a bad job, for the masters are so pleased with him, and eleven's just the age when a boy takes in most. But I keep up my spirits, bless you, I keep up my spirits—there's something tells me Joe will make port yet.'

And the captain gave vent to a sound that was intended for a great cheery guffaw, but which a curious obstruction in his throat turned into something not unlike a sob.

'We ain't the only ones, nor yet the worst off,' he went on after a pause. 'I'm sorry for Mrs. Haroldson there, but how would she like to change with poor Mrs. Lee, who has been lying all day half dead, moaning and groaning after the rascally scoundrelly villain that has deserted her? And there's poor young Raymond Lee, the son, reading for honours at Oxford, where I'd meant to send Joe too when the time came—how would you like to be him when he hears that his father is a blackguard and a thief, whom the gallows would be too good for? A fine young fellow he is as ever stepped; I always took to him from the time he had that stand-up fight at school three years ago for little Joe. It isn't every big boy ready to leave school who would

trouble himself about a little 'un just come in; but there were a couple of great hulking chaps trying to put upon Joe and chaffing him because, mayhap, his father wasn't such a fine gentleman as theirs, and young Lee told them to have done, and they wouldn't, and with that he fought them and gave them such a devil of a thrashing as I'll be bound their timbers show the marks of to this day. A fine fellow—a magnificent fellow. And to think of him having such a father!'

Haroldson made a movement of impatience; wrath at last supplied him with speech.

'Curse the father and the son too!' he burst out. 'Curse them—curse them ten times over for what they have made me and mine suffer.'

'This won't do, mate, 'pon my word it won't do. Better leave the cursing alone altogether in my opinion, but anyhow you mustn't mix up the innocent and the guilty. Come, come, things are bad enough without making 'em worse, and if you work yourself into a passion like this you'll break your poor wife's heart, and you know you will.'

The argument thus used, and perhaps a certain accent of authority audible in the captain's voice, did not pass without effect. Haroldson seemed to make a violent effort at self-control, and having muttered a few words fiercely to himself, relapsed into silence. Presently, with a new effort, he spoke again—this time in tones weak and husky, but constrainedly calm.

'You have told me nothing yet. How did it all happen? Why didn't they stop him?'

'I suppose because he was too sharp for them, the scoundrel. It seems, though, the directors have been getting a little suspicious lately; but instead of grappling him at once,

they fussed and palavered, and talked about getting an assistant-secretary to help him with his work, and in one way or another gave him time to get frightened. Well, things went on so a good while, and at last an assistant-secretary was engaged, and was to come into the office this very day, and there was to be a meeting of the Board, and a grand overhauling of the books, and I don't know what. It was all very cleverly arranged, I dare say, but you see Lee was one too many for them, and when the office was opened this morning he never showed face in it. They sent to his house three mile out of town to see what the matter was, and found Mrs. Lee in a terrible state, for he had gone out the evening before to visit a friend and hadn't been home since; she was afraid some harm had come to him—though, poor soul, she didn't guess what. They searched and searched, but couldn't get to hear anything of him, and at last somebody thought of breaking open the desk where he kept his papers. And sure enough the first thing they found was a letter directed to Mrs. Lee, bidding her good-bye before he was off across the sea, and begging her to forgive him, for the devil had got hold of him and he couldn't help himself. With that poor Mrs. Lee fainted right off, and has never properly come to herself since, and the Company's people went back to the office to see after the books and the strong-box. They were not long of finding out then that he had gone off with everything that could be taken, and had been cheating them with false accounts for years back into the bargain. The Grand Consolidated has been a humbug all along, but there is one person will have made a good thing out of it, and that's Walter Lee.'

'He shan't,' cried Haroldson fiercely, while his face, so pale a minute before, suddenly flushed purple with passion.

‘Who is he that he is not to be caught and punished like other robbers? It will be easy enough to lay hands on him; he can’t be far off yet.’

‘I don’t know about that—it is just the contrary, I’m afraid. A vessel put out of St. Austin’s this morning for Rotterdam, and it’s as certain well-nigh as anything can be that Walter Lee was aboard of her.’

The farmer’s countenance fell, and for a moment he was silent. Presently he seemed to recover himself, and shouted vehemently:

‘I don’t believe a word of it. What! do you mean to tell me that the people at the harbour, where he is so well known, would be such fools as to let him go out of the country without scenting something wrong, or do you think for that matter he would be such a fool as to make the venture? He would try every port in England before St. Austin’s, I can tell you.’

‘So I should have said too,’ answered the captain, ‘but it seems pretty plain he thought different. We can’t make out yet that he was seen by anybody about the harbour, that’s true, but it is certain he took that way. You remember the turnpike between his house and St. Austin’s? Well, the pikeman swears to seeing him pass last night. He was on his dapple-grey, the same that he always rides, and even talked to the man a minute while he was waiting for his change. So there can be no mistake, you see.’

For a few seconds Haroldson did not answer. He had started violently while the captain was speaking, and now he seemed buried in earnest perplexed meditation, as one who strives to arrange his ideas after a great shock. At last he lifted his head, and said, slowly and confidently:

‘His dapple-grey, did you say? Then I can tell you what

has become of Walter Lee. It was to throw us off the scent that he went through the turnpike last night; he struck off across country before he reached St. Austin's, and now he is in hiding at North Hollsworth, in the Black Man.'

The captain stared as though he thought his friend had taken leave of his senses, and so indeed for a while he believed. But Haroldson persisted in his theory, endeavouring to convince his hearers, by recounting the circumstances of his visit to the Black Man that day, his ungracious reception by Mrs. Underwood, and, above all, the presence of a grey horse in the usually empty stable.

'I had a feeling at the time that I had seen that horse somewhere,' he concluded in rapidly increasing excitement, — 'fool that I was not to know it at once. But I know it now, it was Walter Lee's, and I'll swear to it among a thousand. Make haste, make haste, and we'll run the villain to earth yet.'

The captain still looked incredulous.

'It isn't likely the horse is the same,' he said, shaking his head. 'You've made a mistake in your reckoning, mate, depend upon it.'

'No, no, I have made no mistake,' panted Haroldson. 'Make haste, come with me to North Hollsworth, and you shall see. 'Sdeath, will you help me, or will you not?' he added with an impatient stamp of his foot.

'I'll go with you of course if you want me to. There can be no harm in trying, though, mind you, I don't believe it's a bit of use. But stop — supposing it really is as you think, isn't it as likely as not that while we are going to look for him at the Black Man, he may be riding away from us and getting off by the London road? This is just the time for him to be getting under way again, and it isn't likely he

would venture to stop another night after Mrs. Underwood caught you prowling about the stables.'

The farmer looked staggered; evidently he appreciated the force of his shrewd old friend's argument.

'Yes, yes, you are right — quite right. Somebody must go and watch by the London road, of course. I'll do that part of it, and you shall go over to the Black Man. Let me see, you must go to the village first, though, and get two or three to help — he's not a man to let himself be taken without a fight for it.'

'You are not far out there, mate. But how are you going to manage about yourself? It ain't any safer for you than for me to tackle him alone, and, what's more, you shan't try.'

Haroldson laughed savagely.

'You don't know me, or you'd know I'm a match for twenty such as he when my blood's up. No, no, don't you be frightened, Polly,' he added, as he felt his wife's hand laid imploringly on his arm, 'I'll get one of the Dobsons to go with me, or both if you like it better. I shall be safe enough, never fear.'

The Dobsons were two labourers, father and son, who lived in the cottage adjoining, and who, except during harvest-time, sufficed for the work of the farm. These, and old Mrs. Dobson who lived with them, were the only neighbours the Haroldsons had nearer than Hollisworth, half a mile distant.

'You will be sure to take them, John, won't you? Oh! promise me you will not go without them, dear John.'

'Yes, yes, I promise, keep your mind easy, Polly. Now then, let's be off if we don't want to find he has slipped through our fingers. Stop, though, I mustn't forget this.'

He stepped to the fireside, and took down an old fowling-piece from its place over the high mantel-shelf.

‘No, John, no, for Heaven’s sake no,’ entreated his wife, while once more he felt her fingers clasping his arm. ‘Put it back, dear, if you love me, do. There is no saying what may happen; you are not yourself this evening, and’

‘Do you think I’m a baby, that I’m not to be trusted with a gun? And if I were, there will be the two men to look after me, won’t there? Don’t be a fool, Polly — *he* don’t go out to-night without firearms, and I don’t see why I should either.’

‘Don’t go at all, dear, that will be the best. John, John, if you have any pity, stop at home with me and the children.’

‘What! and let that damned villain get clear off to live in clover on my money! Do you take me for an idiot? Captain, what are you waiting for? Do you your duty, and I’ll do mine.’

He shook off the loving pressure by which his arm was still retained, and, gun in hand, strode into the night air. In a moment afterwards the captain followed, having remained behind to whisper:

‘Don’t you be frightened, Mrs. Haroldson. It’s ten to one the scoundrel is half way across to Holland by this time.’

And with that the old seaman hurried out after his friend.

‘You quite understand,’ said Haroldson, who waited for him impatiently outside the threshold. ‘You are to get together a party in the village and go across with them to search the Black Man. As for the London Road, I’ll take care he don’t escape that way.’

There was something in the accent with which the last words were spoken that seemed to rouse the captain’s misgivings.

‘You will get the Dobsons to go with you, won’t you?’ he said, earnestly. ‘You must not break your promise to poor Mrs. Haroldson; you know.’

‘Who talks of breaking promises?’ replied Haroldson, testily. ‘Of course I’ll get the men to go with me, and ten men if I could. Now, if you are to do any good to-night, be off.’

The two separated without more words, the captain setting off at a brisk pace in the direction of the village, while Haroldson went towards the little cottage which stood a few yards distant from his own dwelling. He tapped hastily at the door, which was presently opened by an old woman, holding a light high above her head to discover who the unwonted visitor might be.

‘Tell Tom and Ned to come out to me at once. And hark’ee, let them bring two stout cudgels with them.’

‘My heart alive, who’d have thought of its being the master! Tom and Ned will be mortal sorry, sir, but it happens as how they are up at the village to-night, spending the evening at the Goat and Compasses. How contrairy things do fall out, to be sure! Nothing wrong I hope, sir?’

‘No, no, nothing at all. Good night.’

‘I’ll run and fetch ’em, if so be as you wish it, sir.’

‘I have no time to wait. I am in a hurry.’

He turned abruptly on his heel, and immediately afterwards had disappeared in the darkness, leaving Mrs. Dobson to direct a bewildered stare into vacancy, and then to close the door with a perplexed shake of the head.

When John Haroldson found himself alone, he paused for a moment and looked back to the place where a glow of mingled firelight and candlelight shining through a still unshuttered window marked the position of his own house.

Perhaps in that moment he was thinking of his promise to his wife; but if he was, the hesitation it caused him did not last long, for in the next he had turned his back on the light, and was striding rapidly towards the spot where, at the south-west corner of the moor, the cart-track from North Hollsworth joined the London Road.

The night sky was dark and stormy, and since sunset a high wind had sprung up which sighed and whistled about his ears with a wail almost human. But he heeded it not, and held his way steadily on, his fingers tightening themselves with feverish tenacity round the stock of his gun.

CHAPTER III.

THE DEVIL'S COAL-CELLAR.

CAPTAIN PULLYN was not a man to let grass grow under his heels, but on arriving at Hollsworth it necessarily took him some time to obtain the assistance without which his contemplated visit to the Black Man would have been alike useless and fool-hardy. Thus, with his utmost despatch, it must have been something like an hour from the time of his leaving the farm before he and a hastily organized party of some three or four stalwart villagers presented themselves at the door of the forlorn ale-house on the opposite side of the moor. Here the captain's doubts as to the correctness of Haroldson's theory were speedily strengthened, the landlord's handsome young wife assuring them that nobody was in the house save herself and her bed-ridden husband.

'If you doubt my word, you may come and look for yourselves,' she added, with a defiant toss of her dark tresses.

‘It shan’t be said I was afraid of your coming across anything wrong in my house. But you will be disappointed, that’s all I have got to tell you.’

The captain decided on entering nevertheless, and the party went into the bar-room, and thence into the kitchen. In the latter place the remains of supper stood on the table—an unusually choice one probably, judging from the chicken bones with which two plates were strewn, and a small quantity of mulled wine left still steaming in one of two tumblers.

‘Ha! so you have just had a guest at supper,’ said the captain, knitting his brows while he scanned the landlady’s face. ‘And have given him a good one too, or I am mistaken.’

She answered his frown with another, only a great deal darker.

‘I suppose I and my husband are at liberty to have what we like for supper,’ she answered haughtily. ‘This is my plate, and that is his, which I have just brought down from his bedroom. As for guests, we have not had one near us since last market-day.’

‘That is strange, for Farmer Haroldson tells me he saw a splendid dapple-grey in your stable to-day. He thought he knew it, but of course that must have been his fancy.’

He was looking at her narrowly as he spoke, and thought he detected a slight change of colour at the words. But it was difficult to decide whether it arose from the consciousness of guilt, or from simple anger at his inquisition.

‘He may have known it fifty times over for what I can tell. I didn’t, that’s all. A stranger brought it this morning, asking me to keep it till the evening, and half an hour ago he came and fetched it again. That’s the way he took, if you want to follow him.’

She pointed in the direction precisely opposite to that in which lay the London road.

‘Very obliging of you to volunteer the information, I’m sure,’ said the captain drily. ‘You are quite certain, I suppose, that the horse and his master are really gone?’

‘As you seem to doubt, you had better make sure for yourself. You are welcome to search the stable and the house too.’

‘Well, it will be a satisfaction to us, Mrs. Underwood, I don’t deny.’

She waved her hand imperiously towards the door leading into the stable-yard. Thither the captain and his companions went, but a very slight examination sufficed to show them that the horse seen by Haroldson in the afternoon was no longer there. Nor was a subsequent search for the creature’s master any more successful. As Mrs. Underwood had told them, nobody was in the house but herself and her husband—the latter too old and infirm even to comprehend the questions which Captain Pullyn did not fail to put to him. Thus, after a long search—useless except to convince them that no Walter Lee was then in hiding in or near the Black Man—the visitors took leave, making the best apology they could to Mrs. Underwood, who received it, as might have been expected, sullenly and ungraciously.

‘Who will come with me to the London road?’ asked the captain as soon as he and his comrades found themselves once more under the night sky. ‘I shan’t be satisfied till I have heard what Haroldson has been doing all this time. Not that I exactly believe in the poor fellow’s fancy, you know; but if anything could persuade me he was right, it would be that woman’s manner. It ain’t natural, my boys, and I don’t like it.’

Partly out of a real wish to be of service, partly out of curiosity and love of excitement, all signified their willingness to see the adventure to a conclusion; and, striking across the plain in a southwesterly direction, the party set out for their night walk over the Black Moor.

A wild rough walk it was for a stormy night—over uneven ground where ever and anon large bristling clumps of furze presented themselves, not always easy to avoid stumbling against in the darkness. There might have been some danger of the captain and his companions losing their way, but that it was from time to time shown them by the light of the moon, which had now risen, and every now and then was to be seen through an occasional rent in the dark masses of cloud that careered over the sky. The wind was still very high, and howled about the ears of the wayfarers with grotesque variety of note—sometimes as though endeavouring fantastically to imitate the cry of a living thing in pain. They pushed on resolutely, however, in spite of the difficulties of the way, only at last slackening their pace when the foremost of the party turned round to say warningly:

‘For the Lord’s sake look well to your footing. We are close on the Devil’s Coal-Cellar here—I know it by these bushes.’

‘So we are,’ said another, stopping to look round him, ‘Well, it’s an ugly place to be near, especially on a night like this. Save us! what a noise the wind makes!’

‘The wind—or something else,’ said the first, with a shudder. ‘For my part, I’m never this way but I fancy I hear some queer noise or other. Lord be good to us, what was that?’

‘A kind of sob or groan, wasn’t it?’ tremulously whispered

his comrade. 'And right aneath our feet it sounded, too. But somehow it wasn't like a man's voice altogether.'

'A man!—who said it was a man? A man at the bottom of the Devil's Coal-Cellar! No, it was no man—no man of flesh and blood like you and me, that is.'

'What confounded nonsense are you two lubbers jabbering about?' testily interposed the captain. 'Did you never hear the wind howl before, that you hold such a parley over it? Lead on, and don't make jackasses of yonrselves.'

The party proceeded a few paces, and then came to a halt again.

They had passed the bushes which an instant ago had concealed from them the mouth of the pit, and now found themselves skirting its very brink. Instinctively they paused on their way to look and listen, unconsciously fascinated by the sinister horror of the time and the place. At this moment the moon was completely hidden, and the abyss at their feet was to be divined rather than seen—its locality being marked only by a blackness more intense than that prevailing elsewhere, and its limits defined by the dark outline of the bushes which here and there had sprung up on its opposite margin. But for a spectator who knew what lay between him and those bushes, the mystery which night hung over the spot rendered it not the less grim and gruesome.

'It must have been the wind,' whispered one of the two men who had spoken before. 'All's quiet enough now, anyhow.'

'Of course it was the wind,' said the captain, gruffly, 'who thought it was anything else? Now get on, boys—we shall be within hail of the road in another minute.'

They walked on, soon leaving the pit-hole behind them, and presently a flood of moonlight bursting from behind a black cloud showed them, not fifty yards in front, the sign-post marking the spot where the London road touched the corner of the moor. This was the place where Haroldson was to have kept watch, but, to the captain's surprise, it appeared entirely deserted.

'It's an odd thing,' he said, as he quickened his pace. 'I made sure he would have waited till he heard what we had been doing.'

Just then one of the party, happening to turn his head, uttered an exclamation of surprise which arrested the captain in his course.

'There's somebody standing up near the pit-hole, sir. What do you think it can be?'

All looked round. A figure, distinctly visible in the moonlight, stood at the mouth of the pit, bending downwards, almost as though seeking to explore the depths below.

The captain shouted a stentorian 'Ahoy;' the figure raised its head with a sudden start, looking round in seeming bewilderment; then, on a second summons, came away from the pit-hole and began slowly to approach. As it drew near, the captain, with a sense of relief which he would hardly have cared to admit, recognized the athletic form of his friend Haroldson.

'Why the devil couldn't you say it was you at once?' he asked rather roughly. 'I declare I didn't know what to think. Well, you have had no luck, I suppose, any more than we have? There's nobody been by your way, eh?'

The farmer shook his head slowly; then, opening his mouth with an apparent effort, brought out the word:

'Nobody.'

His voice sounded so hoarse and tremulous that the captain could not repress a feeling of anxiety on his behalf.

‘Cheer up, old friend, what ’s the good of crying over spilt milk? Here’s what comes of being alone, you see—you’ve been moping yourself into the dismal, and there has been nobody to talk you out of them. Why didn’t you take the Dobsons with you?’

‘It was not my fault—I tried to get them—indeed I did. God knows that everything has been against me.’

He put his hand up to his forehead with a wildness of gesture which increased the captain’s solicitude.

‘You mustn’t take on like this about a lot of yellow metal-shavings, ’pon my soul you mustn’t. What’s money but dross after all, as the parson says on Sundays? And as for not getting law of the fellow, there’s no use in fretting about that. He ’s a bad ’un, and must come to a bad end, without you to help him.’

‘That’s true,’ cried Haroldson eagerly, that ’s true. Say that again.’

‘Not if you put yourself in such a heat about it. But folks like him generally get what they deserve sooner or later, if that’s any comfort to you.’

‘And he has deserved the worst,’ insisted Haroldson, feverishly. ‘The very worst—eh?’

‘Yes, yes, quite as bad as he ’s likely to get, at all events. But come home, and let your poor wife see you are safe—she’ll care more about that than the money, whatever you do.’

He laid his hand on Haroldson’s arm to lead him away. All strength seemed to have departed from the farmer’s vigorous frame, and he gave himself up to the captain’s will with almost childlike submission.

The party now directed their steps towards the farmhouse. On drawing near, they found themselves waited for by Mrs. Haroldson, who stood watching at the garden-gate.

‘All right,’ cried the captain cheerily as soon as he was near enough to be heard. ‘We haven’t run down the villain, but we’ve come back to port safe and sound ourselves, and that’s something to say.’

She came out to meet them with hands clasped fervently in gratitude.

‘Thank God for that. Oh! John, if you knew what I have been suffering since you left me! When I heard the gun, I thought I must have died.’

‘A gun!’ cried the captain in amazement. ‘I heard no gun, but to be sure, I haven’t been sitting quiet all evening as you have. Did you hear anything, Jack? it must have been more your way than ours.’

The farmer looked up with a vacant, bewildered expression which more than ever increased his friend’s concern; then glanced towards the piece he held in his hand, as though with difficulty collecting his ideas.

‘No,’ he answered at length. ‘At least—yes—that is—I think I heard something in the woods—a great way off. It must have been poachers.’

‘A yes! of course,’ said the captain. ‘Pity they made Mrs. Haroldson so nervous. Hollo, mate, what’s the matter?’

‘I am giddy,’ whispered Haroldson, while he clutched his friend’s arm for support. ‘Take me into the house.’

Captain Pullyn paused an instant to dismiss his escort of villagers, who were ready enough to go home now that all chance of adventure was at an end; then, drawing the farmer’s arm through his own, led him into the kitchen. Here

the unfortunate man, pale and haggard, dropped into a chair, looking so much the ghost of what he had been two hours before, that both the rough seaman and the tender wife were thoroughly alarmed.

‘Run and get him a drop of brandy, Mrs. Haroldson. Come, man, cheer up and look alive, if it’s only for the sake of these two pretty little ones.’

He pointed to Minnie and Amy, who were coming softly up to look at father, creeping along almost as timidly as if he had been a stranger. Their mother had had no heart to put them to bed during her husband’s absence, and with a big picture-book spread before them they had been allowed to sit up, half dozing, in their favourite corner, whence they now emerged, looking quite cowed, as indeed they were, by the strangeness of the hour, and a vague sense of the presence of disaster.

‘Come along, my hearties,’ said the captain coaxingly, ‘come and give father a kiss, and tell him he’ll live to see fair weather yet.’

Thus encouraged, the children approached less shyly, and Minnie was endeavouring to hoist herself up on her father’s knee, when she was arrested by a sudden cry of alarm from her mother. The child’s dress had caught in the lock of the gun which stood upright against John Haroldson’s chair.

‘The gun, the gun!’ exclaimed Mrs. Haroldson, drawing away the child almost with a shriek. ‘For mercy’s sake take care; it is loaded.’

Her husband had been leaning back in his chair with closed eyes, but he opened them at this and said ‘No,’ then paused abruptly.

‘Not loaded? I thought you always kept it loaded.’

‘Not—not this time,’ said the farmer faintly.

‘If I had only known!’ sighed Mrs. Haroldson—‘how much anxiety I should have been spared to-night! Oh! John, forgive me, but I was so afraid you might do something rash—something you might spend the rest of your life in repenting.’

‘The brandy, for God’s sake!’ interposed the captain. He was standing close by Haroldson’s side, and could note every change that passed over the almost ghastly countenance.

The affrighted wife rushed to the table, and seized the glass she had already filled. But ere she could raise it to her husband’s lips, his head fell heavily backwards, his face flushed, his teeth clenched, and he began breathing quickly and convulsively. It was evident that the case was one calling for other than ordinary household remedies, and Captain Pullyn set off at his quickest rate of speed to fetch the doctor from Hollsworth.

Before midnight John Haroldson had been carried to bed, pronounced to be suffering from a severe attack of congestion of the brain.

CHAPTER IV.

A RICH RELATION.

TWO months passed away, and the farmer, though out of danger, had not yet left his sick-bed. During this time he had been ill almost to death, his life being despaired of for weeks together; and even now that he had begun to recover, he was so worn and reduced by sickness as to be for the present but the shadow of his former self.

Two terrible months these had been for Mary Haroldson,

who, in addition to the overwhelming anxiety caused by her husband's illness, had been harassed by prospects of impending ruin and beggary. The accounts of the St. Austin's Grand Consolidated General Agency Company had been undergoing examination meanwhile, and matters were discovered to have been so managed that the shareholders would not only lose every shilling of their paid-up capital, but were further liable for heavy debts contracted in their name. Unsuspected by any one but the defaulting secretary, Walter Lee, the affairs of the Company had been going wrong for years, and what wrecks of its property had survived imprudent or dishonest administration he had carried off with him in his flight. Of recovering the money thus stolen, or any portion of it, there did not now appear to be the slightest chance. In spite of the most strenuous efforts, nothing had been discovered throwing any light on the mystery which had from the first shrouded the movements of the fugitive, except indeed in so far as suspicions of Mrs. Underwood's complicity in his flight might have been confirmed by her disappearance a week or two afterwards.

But in the midst of all the obscurity and confusion, one fact came out quite clearly even to the perplexed comprehension of poor care-laden Mary Haroldson; and this was that such of the shareholders as could not afford to pay the calls made on them must be sold up and ruined, and among them the tenants of Black Moor Farm.

There was no friend near her to whom to apply for assistance in her straits. Captain Pullyn, who alone of all her neighbours would have been willing to make substantial sacrifices to befriend her and her family, was a fellow-victim with her husband in the Company's ruin, and was at this time in the thick of his own troubles. So the poor woman,

with her husband lying in hourly danger of death, and an execution for debt staring her in the face, had written to the rich Mrs. Fanshawe of St. Austin's, who had no children of her own to provide for, and from whose abundance a trifle for the relief of a sister's family would never be missed.

To this appeal, wrung from the despair of a wife and mother's heart, Mrs. Fanshawe had not been altogether deaf. She had driven over from St. Austin's one day in her grand carriage, and spent nearly an hour in hearing the tale of her sister's sorrows. She had shaken her head over John Haroldson's speculative rashness, and declared that she had foreseen some such catastrophe for him all along. She had listened patiently to Mrs. Haroldson's calculations of what would suffice to save the family from absolute beggary—the advance of a couple of hundreds for the purpose of buying in the furniture and paying a year's rent on the farm; and had graciously nodded approval at the declaration that, in the event of such a loan being made, a sum should be regularly laid by each quarter for its repayment in five years at furthest. She had patted the children on the head and asked them their ages, pronouncing Amy a funny little old-fashioned thing, and professing to find in Minnie a striking resemblance to herself. She had even carried her condescension towards the latter so far as to ask the child how she would like to go and see her at St. Austin's. She had told her sister she was very sorry for her misfortunes and hoped soon to hear a better account. And finally she had discovered that there was positively not another moment to spare, and had got into her grand carriage again, leaving a five-pound note behind her.

Nearly a fortnight had now passed since the rich lady's

visit, and nothing more had been heard of her at the farm. In the meantime, however, Mrs. Haroldson had been relieved of her heaviest care by the decided amendment of her husband, who, as has been said, was now pronounced out of danger. But what a difference his sufferings had wrought in him!—such a difference that even the particulars of his wife's application to Mrs. Fanshawe and its results scarcely sufficed to move him to indignation. Between his illness and his misfortunes his spirit appeared to be utterly crushed and broken; he lay in a state of chronic listlessness and dejection from which nothing had power to rouse him, save indeed sometimes the prattle of his little Minnie. For the child, so dear to him always, seemed dearer than ever now that dark days had come upon him.

One afternoon about this time Mrs. Haroldson was in her kitchen preparing her husband's dinner, and drearily wondering how many more dinners were to be prepared for him in that familiar home where the brightest period of their lives (alas! how quickly it had retreated into the past!) had been spent.

With the gradual subsidence of her fear for her husband's safety grew stronger and stronger that other fear as to how they should bear the poverty and destitution which, as she could not forget, daily threatened them nearer. The wolf was at the door, and now that she had given up all hope of substantial aid from her sister she saw not how he could be kept out. She thought of her children, who in happy carelessness of the future were playing beside her, and sighed heavily, when suddenly the sound of wheels drawing up in front of the house caused her to look round. And then her heart gave a bound of hope, for a stylish carriage which she recognised stood outside the garden-gate, while a lady

whom she knew was being helped to descend by a powdered and liveried footman.

The lady was Mrs. Fanshawe, her sister.

Mrs. Fanshawe was a tall, dignified-looking woman, a good deal older than her sister—she was at this time about forty years of age—with a fine figure, and a face which could still lay claim to being a handsome one. That is to say, the complexion was fresh and well-preserved, and the features correctly cast after the best models, for there was not mind enough in the face to stamp it with any distinctive character of its own. As Mrs. Fanshawe had herself observed, there was a certain resemblance between herself and little Minnie Haroldson, but it was a superficial resemblance at best. Her clear blue eyes were of a paler and colder hue than those of the child, and her hair could only have been called golden by flattery, lacking as it did the rich lustre which glanced from Minnie's curls. Still there was a real likeness between aunt and niece so long as the countenances of both were in repose, but when the child smiled or grew animated it disappeared at once. And it happened very often that Minnie grew animated.

Minnie was sitting at the table snipping up pieces of old calico under the impression that she was cutting out a dress for her doll, and the visitor paused to stroke her head before taking the chair which Mrs. Haroldson hastened to bring forward.

'She looks very well to-day,' said Mrs. Fanshawe admiringly. 'You know me again, my dear, do you not?'

'Oh yes!' answered Minnie frankly. 'You are Aunt Fanshawe, and you said that some day I was to go and see you at St. Austin's.'

‘Did I, my dear? Well, you will like it very much, won’t you?’

‘When father is better,’ said Minnie, nodding her head. ‘But father isn’t well enough to take me yet.’

‘Oh indeed!’ said Mrs. Fanshawe drily. She paused, and then added: ‘I have something to say to your mamma, my dear. Will you go and play in the next room for a few minutes, and take your sister with you?’

‘Go, my darlings,’ said Mrs. Haroldson; and, with all the authority of her riper years, Minnie took possession of Amy, and the two marched off together.

The visitor seated herself, and then, having waited till the children had closed the door behind them, began:

‘Mary, I have taken a great fancy to your eldest little girl. What do you think of my arranging to adopt her?’

The mother grew suddenly pale.

‘To adopt her! To — to take her away with you do you mean?’

‘When I speak of adopting her I can mean nothing else. Of course she would live under my roof.’

‘No, no,’ cried Mrs. Haroldson hastily. ‘Oh! Leonora, don’t be angry with me, but I could not think of parting with her for a moment. It would break my heart.’

‘You must consider the subject well before you decide,’ said Mrs. Fanshawe, not a whit discouraged. ‘This offer is one which will take a great burden off your hands, and’ . . .

‘A burden! Minnie a burden! Oh! if you knew’ . . .

‘What it is to be a mother,’ poor Mrs. Haroldson was going to add, but she checked herself in time.

‘I know very well what I am saying,’ said Mrs. Fanshawe, with frigid stateliness. ‘Whatever Minnie may be to you,

she is not to be maintained and educated for nothing, I suppose, any more than other children. But that is not all I was going to say. You were speaking the other day of two or three hundreds being needed to pay your rent and buy in your furniture. Now I should consider it part of the arrangement that you should have whatever you wanted for the purpose — if you agree to my proposal, that is, you understand.'

Mrs. Haroldson quite understood, but she shook her head nevertheless.

'It is very kind of you, and I am very grateful,' she said humbly. 'But I could not part with her — indeed, indeed, I could not. It would be like selling her for gold,' she added with a shudder.

Mrs. Fanshawe drew herself up stiffly.

'One would think you imagined that I wanted the child to make a slave of. I tell you that I propose to adopt her — to treat her in all respects as if she were my own; to forget in fact that she is anything else. She would be educated and brought up precisely as a daughter of my own would have been educated and brought up; she would be introduced into society when she is old enough, as Miss Fanshawe, and she would inherit all we have to leave. I have been consulting Mr. Fanshawe on the subject, and I have his entire sanction.'

'In this as in all other matters,' she might have added, for Mr. Fanshawe was a husband who was never known to refuse his wife anything. Not that he was particularly uxorious; but, except where the making of money was concerned, he was lazy and apathetic, and cared for nothing enough to make a fuss about it.

‘If you like to throw away all these advantages for your child, of course there is nothing to be said,’ went on Mrs. Fanshawe, ‘but for my part I do not understand how you will be able to reconcile yourself to a course so culpably selfish.’

A course so culpably selfish! the big words sounded very dreadful in the mother’s ears. She was silent for a while; she had decided to keep her child, and was endeavouring to justify the decision to her conscience. To be accused of culpable selfishness where Minnie was concerned was very terrible, but then the idea of parting with her was more terrible still.

Mrs. Fanshawe thought she had triumphed, and proceeded to her final stipulation.

‘There is nothing in such matters like a thorough preliminary explanation,’ she said, coughing with an air of slight embarrassment behind her delicately-gloved hand, ‘and there is one more point on which I should wish to have a very clear understanding. If I consent to undertake such responsibilities towards the child, it can only be on the condition that she shall be altogether mine, and that no other influence than mine shall be brought to bear on her. I have suffered too much from your husband’s rudeness and presumption not to know what it would be if he had any pretext for interfering in my domestic concerns. Therefore you will understand that, if you give up the child to me, there must be an end of all communication between her and her former home. She will be my daughter, and, as your husband’s conduct has made all intercourse between his family and mine impossible, you and he must both be contented never to see her.’

‘Never to see Minnie! the idea is absurd — outrageous,’

and the mother almost laughed in the defiant bitterness of her spirit.

Mrs. Fanshawe gathered her shawl round her with a look of deeply offended dignity.

‘I had hardly expected this. You write to ask me for help; and, when I come to give it you, I am told that my proposals are absurd. Well, I am glad that I have at least amused you, though I could have wished to serve you more substantially.’

She was rising to go, when her sister laid a trembling hand on her sleeve.

‘Leonora, dear Leonora, don’t go away. I was very wrong to speak so, but I was not myself for the moment. There is nothing else in the world that I would not do to please you, only it would kill me to give up my child. You will forgive me, and help me, won’t you?’

‘I should be very glad to help you, Mary, but it appears you will not allow me to do so.’

‘Any way but that — any way but that. I could not bear it, you know, and you would not wish me to die. And there is her father too — he would never consent — I am sure he would not.’

‘Her father knows what he is about a great deal too well to refuse,’ rejoined the visitor confidently. ‘I have no great opinion of John Haroldson, but I do not give him credit for either such blindness or such selfishness as you seem to attribute to him. But of course if his consent is not asked it will not be given — I quite agree with you in that.’

‘I will ask him if you wish it,’ sobbed Mrs. Haroldson, terrified at her sister’s offended tone. ‘But I know he will not consent — I am afraid it will make him ill again even to think of it.’

‘I am of a different opinion. However, if you do not choose to consult him, it is of no consequence — none to me at least.’

In her anxiety not to alienate the only person from whom help was possible, Mrs. Haroldson made the concession which seemed to be expected of her, and undertook at once to inform her husband of the proffered terms.

‘But you must not be angry if he refuses,’ she added tearfully as she left the room. ‘For he will, I know he will.’

As might have been expected, Mrs. Haroldson had estimated her husband’s character more correctly than her sister. When the farmer was told that Mrs. Fanshawe was willing to help him on condition of being allowed to take possession of little Minnie, he fell into such a fit of rage as made it difficult to recognize the lethargic invalid of a few moments before.

‘The vile kidnapping hag!’ he exclaimed passionately. ‘Ha! so she would take Minnie from me, would she? take away my little Minnie and never let me see her again? Say no — a thousand times no!’

John Haroldson’s ‘No,’ fierce as it was, was only an echo of that already sounded in the mother’s heart; but in her tender conscientiousness she felt bound to remind him of the advantages they were rejecting for the child.

‘I think you are right, dear,’ she said falteringly. ‘Though we must not forget that it is an opportunity for the darling to grow up a rich and accomplished woman. It will be very different for her if she stays with us, John.’

‘She *shall* stay with us,’ thundered the father. ‘She is our child, and that’s enough. Now go and tell the woman downstairs I said so. My little Minnie — did she want to

take away my little Minnie? But she shan't — go and tell her she shan't.'

'Yes, dear. You are quite right, I am sure. At least it would have broken my heart if you had decided differently.'

She went down, and as gently as possible announced the failure of her mission.

'You won't be angry,' she added in terror as she marked the look of stony displeasure settling on her sister's face.

'Oh! Leonora, you will have pity, you will help us even though we cannot give up our child. John will pay you back every farthing if he works for it night and day.'

'Mr. Haroldson has not chosen to oblige me, and he can hardly expect me to oblige him.'

'But Leonora, we could not have parted with her. She is everything to us — she and her sister.'

'Indeed! Well, I can only say that I hope there are not many parents who would so selfishly prefer their own happiness to that of their daughter.'

'She would not have been happy away from us,' broke in Mrs. Haroldson. 'You would have been very kind to her, I know, but she would have pined after us continually. The darling! she has hardly been out of our sight since she was born.'

Mrs. Fanshawe had made a step towards the door, but came back at these words.

'You say it is because the child herself might be unhappy that you will not accept my offer. Very well, then I repeat it in another form. I am willing to do everything for you and your husband that I have said, on the condition that the child shall come and stay six months in my house — with permission at the end of that time to remain or go as she pleases. All I stipulate for is that you will make no

attempt to influence her choice. What do you say to that?’

But still Mrs. Haroldson shook her head.

‘Don’t ask me, dear Leonora, don’t ask me. She is my own little darling child, and I cannot, cannot part with her.’

‘Just as you like, of course. Only in that case pray don’t try to persuade me that you are consulting her feelings in the matter rather than your own. Good-bye, Mary, I had really hoped that I might be of service to you.’

‘What will become of us?’ sobbed Mrs. Haroldson. ‘Oh! Leonora, you who are so rich and so happy, won’t you help us?’

‘That depends altogether on yourself. My offer is still open, and if you change your mind you have only to write and tell me. Thomas, let down the steps.’

She was already outside the house as she spoke, and in another minute was reclining on the luxurious cushions of her barouche and whirling rapidly away through the air.

Mrs. Haroldson remained for some time at her door, looking with tearful eyes after her sister’s carriage as it bowed merrily along in the evening sunshine. But in the midst of all her causes for grief and anxiety, and in spite of the tears in her eyes, there was at her heart something not unlike a sense of joy and triumph. For had she not kept Minnie, and was she not to keep Minnie still?

She was suddenly roused from her reverie by footsteps which sounded close beside her on the gravel-walk. She looked up with a start, and saw two men—attired shabbily and yet with a certain attempt at jauntiness—who, while she had been gazing into the distance, had entered the garden by the open gate, and now came to a pause within two or three paces of where she was standing.

‘Sorry to disturb you, mum,’ said the foremost, touching his hat with awkward courtesy as her eye met his.

She was not re-assured by the gesture, and started back in undefinable alarm.

‘Who are you?’ she asked tremulously. ‘What do you want?’

‘Don’t you be frightened, mum, I ain’t the chap, nor this gent neither, to put a lady to any unnecessary ill-convenience. But dooty is dooty, and dooty must be done. This will show you what we’ve come about, mum.’

He held a paper before her eyes as he spoke; she glanced at it, and, comprehending all, turned very pale.

The two men were sheriff’s officers.

CHAPTER V.

POVERTY, NOT WILL.

THE Haroldsons had always been respected by their neighbours, and a great deal of compassion was expressed in the village when it became known that the bailiffs were at the farm. Foremost amongst the sympathisers was he who had least means to help, Captain Pullyn, who came over early next morning to sit in the sick man’s chamber and give him what consolation and encouragement he could. But the task was a very thankless one, for the farmer was so utterly crushed and prostrated by his misfortunes as to appear for the time incapable of receiving comfort. The good captain was almost in despair as he found how ineffectual were all his efforts to excite even a single flash of the old hopeful energetic spirit.

‘I don’t see what the devil there is in it all that you should haul down your flag like this,’ he said, half dolefully,

half angrily. 'You are a young man—good twenty year younger than me, anyhow—you have your legs and arms all complete, a will to work, at least you ought to have, and a good conscience into the bargain. What more do you want to begin the world with?'

No answer, save a feverish tossing of the bedclothes.

'Look at me,' went on the captain—'Sixty year old next birthday, and all my cargo washed overboard in the same squall. But Lord bless you, I set to work baling the water out again, and what's happened? Why, I'm righting myself already. What do you think, I've got Brown Brothers—the great house at St. Austin's, you know—to promise to take on Joe as junior clerk from the day he's fifteen. And that ain't all, for I've lighted on a Commercial Academy for Young Gentlemen, highly recommended, that has agreed to do for him till then to the tune of seven pound a quarter. So with the little craft laid up safe in dock like that, there will only be a voyage or two a year for the old 'un to make, and everything will be ship-shape again, pretty nigh. Why shouldn't it be the same with you, mate?'

The farmer sighed hopelessly.

'I'll tell you what it is,' said the captain, his solicitude suggesting a new line of argument. 'If you go on like this, Jack, I shall say you're a damned fool, and that's all about it.'

'I dare say I am,' responded Haroldson feebly. 'But I can't help it.'

Captain Pullyn looked at his friend, and shook his head very gravely, as a physician in presence of a particularly unfavourable symptom.

'If I only knew how to put his blood up,' he muttered. 'It ain't natural to see him taking things like this. A good round of stiff swearing, now, would be worth any money.'

He reflected a moment, and resumed:

‘I wonder what Walter Lee is doing just now. Safe in New York, perhaps, sipping sherry-cobbler, bought and paid for with our money. A damned infernal rascal, eh?’

At the first mention of the name the sick man started convulsively, as one on whose newly-closed wound a rash finger has been laid. But he said nothing.

‘Oh, oh! you have forgiven him, have you?’ rejoined the captain tauntingly. ‘Anything you would like me to say to him if I chance to come across him on the other side of the water? Your love, I suppose, and would like to know how he finds himself.’

‘For God’s sake don’t,’ exclaimed the farmer hoarsely, and he writhed as though under the surgeon’s knife.

The captain looked at him with affected surprise.

‘Don’t! What do you mean? What am I not to do?’

‘Don’t speak to me of—of him, of that man. I have been trying all these weeks to forget him, and you will not let me.’

‘I don’t see why you should try to forget him. There’s a good reason why he shouldn’t like to think of you, but it is a reason that only cuts one way. He has done you hundreds of pounds’ worth of mischief, but you never did him a penn’orth.’

Haroldson made a new movement, so violent that it seemed almost like a spasm, and turned away his face as though determined to hear no more.

‘You are driving me mad,’ he cried tremulously. ‘For Heaven’s sake go away and give me a little peace.’

Captain Pullyn understood at last that his well-meant efforts were doing harm rather than good, and, shaking his head yet more gravely than before, reluctantly rose from

the bedside and quitted the room as softly as a pair of creaking boots would allow.

He found Mrs. Haroldson in the kitchen, attempting to occupy herself with the preparation of a dinner which she knew that neither she nor her husband would have heart to touch.

The two men who since yesterday had been the virtual rulers of the household were not actually present, their duty having for the while taken them to discuss a pipe and pot of beer in the trim little parlour which had been Mrs. Haroldson's especial pride. But, to say nothing of the strong odour of tobacco which sufficiently proved that they were not far off, they had left too many traces of themselves behind to make it possible to forget what had happened. They had been taking an inventory of the kitchen furniture that morning; and the disorder of the usually neatly arranged dresser, the ink bottle with two huge quills standing upright in it, and the black stains left to dry on the carefully scrubbed deal table, remained as so many mute evidences of the fact. Then the children, silently playing at cat's cradle in a corner, had a depressed, neglected look about them which to any one who knew them as they ordinarily were must have suggested that their mother's mind was preoccupied by a load of unwonted care. In imitation of the bailiffs, they had been very busy that morning with pen, ink, and paper, and the consequence was that their pinafores and fingers had come off even worse than the kitchen table. But nobody had spoken of changing the pinafores or washing the fingers.

'I am sorry to see Jack so down in the mouth,' said the captain, pausing to exchange a few words with Mrs. Haroldson before going out. 'It's half the battle to keep up a stout heart, in my opinion.'

‘If it were only possible,’ said the poor wife, with a sigh that went straight to the captain’s heart. ‘But it is very, difficult.’

‘So it is, so it is, but you must try for all that.’

‘It isn’t only for ourselves that I feel it,’ she continued, while the tears she had struggled to repress began to gather rapidly in her eyes. ‘But when I think of my poor innocent children . . . Oh! Captain Pullyn, how dreadful for them to be in the house while such things are going on! I feel almost as if I were doing them wrong to allow it.’

‘It is a pity of course, but anyhow it’s no fault of yours. You mustn’t fret yourself for what you can’t make different.’

As the captain spoke, Mrs. Haroldson did not forget that things might be made very different if she chose, by the simple process of writing to her sister. But she did not explain this to him, and left his assumption to go without contradiction. What was the reason for this reserve with her old friend she did not even herself suspect, yet there was a reason for it notwithstanding. It was this, that instinctively she knew the captain would vigorously condemn Mrs. Fanshawe’s offer, and Mrs. Fanshawe for making it. And unconsciously to herself the unhappy mother was beginning to regard Mrs. Fanshawe’s offer as a possible resource.

Captain Pullyn stood silent for a moment, looking sadly and thoughtfully at the children, then said abruptly:

‘I must be going now; good bye. And, Mrs. Haroldson, go up and sit awhile with Jack if you can. I don’t think he ought to be left too much by himself, and you will understand him better than I do.’

He grasped her hand warmly, and departed, leaving her to hasten upstairs to her husband’s bedside.

But John Haroldson was not to be roused by the tender

pleadings of his wife any more than by the rougher eloquence of the captain. In vain she forced herself to speak to him pleasantly and hopefully out of the depths of her own misery; he only shook his head and turned away in a blank dreary apathy perhaps even more painful to witness than a vehement demonstration of sorrow.

Suddenly he lifted his head from the pillow, and raised himself on one arm as though to listen. The sound of a childish sob had caught his ear, and his interest was roused at once.

‘What is Minnie crying for? Is she hurt?’

Mrs. Haroldson went to the door, and saw Minnie slowly ascending the staircase, crying the while as if her heart would break.

‘What is the matter?’ exclaimed John Haroldson again, ‘What have they been doing to her?’

The child heard her father’s voice, and came up with quickened pace, followed at a distance by Amy, who was considering the spectacle of her elder sister’s grief with a grave and solemn interest not unmingled with awe.

‘My pet! what is it? Come and tell father all about it.’

The assurance of her father’s sympathy made Minnie roar with redoubled vigour.

‘The men downstairs, she sobbed’ — ‘make them go away, father, please. They have taken away Selina’s house; they say it isn’t mine any more, but it is, isn’t it?’

Selina was Minnie’s favourite doll, and Selina’s house was a red brick villa, elegantly furnished according to the most approved doll fashion, and standing almost as high as Minnie herself—the child’s most costly possession.

The father’s lip quivered so that he could not speak. The mother drew the child towards her and endeavoured to com-

fort her, pressing the little head to her bosom and saying soothingly:

‘Never mind, my pet, never mind. Minnie must not think of it any more.’

‘Make them go away,’ persisted Minnie. ‘Tell them they shan’t have my things.’

‘My darling, I can’t,’ said Mrs. Haroldson helplessly. ‘You must not mind them, Minnie dear; they have a right to be here.’

‘But they shan’t take away Selina’s house,’ panted the child. ‘Mother, go and tell them they shan’t.’

‘They must do as they like, darling. Mother can’t help it.’

‘But it is mine,’ protested Minnie with a new flood of tears. ‘Father gave it me last birthday—all for myself. Father won’t let anybody take it from me, will you father?’

The farmer exchanged a glance of mute agony with his wife, and remained silent.

‘Father would do all he could for his little Minnie,’ said the mother. ‘But he must not say anything to those men, my pet.’

Minnie twisted her little hands tightly together, with a movement of childish grief which must have been hard for any parent to witness.

‘Why not? Father used not to be afraid of anybody. Why not?’

‘Because—because’ . . . The mother paused; how was she to make the child understand the grim necessities of the law of bankruptcy? ‘Because what we have does not belong to us any more, but to somebody else. Because poor people cannot do as they like, and we are very poor now.’

‘Are we? Then I want to be rich again; I won’t be poor any more.’

And the tiny frame became convulsed with violent, almost hysterical sobs, while the childish hands were wrung more tightly than ever.

For a minute there was silence, broken only by the child's sobs and a half-choked murmur, in which the words 'Selina's house' were alone audible. The mother felt herself powerless to comfort, and stole a despairing look at her husband. He was sitting up, propping himself on his elbow while he fixed his eyes with straining intensity on the weeping child before him. On his countenance there was an expression of doubt and pain such as may be imagined on the face of a prisoner stretched on the rack to make him confess or recant. And truly John Haroldson was on the rack just now if ever man was. Presently he took his eyes off the child, and turned them on his wife, whispering:

'What if you were to write to your sister?'

'I was thinking the same thing,' she answered faintly. 'It seems almost wicked to let her suffer like this when it might be so different.'

'Write then,' said the farmer quickly; 'write at once.' And he fell back on his pillow as one who has lost all sustaining power of nerve and muscle.

The mother once more addressed herself to the task of comfort.

'Don't cry, pet, don't cry. Mother will try to make the men go away, and Minnie shan't be poor any longer. Minnie shall be rich, and have dolls bigger than Selina.'

These assurances, and the soothing tone in which they were uttered, gradually had the desired effect, and in a few minutes Minnie was so far calm again as to perch herself on her father's bed with a promise to be very quiet while mother was writing.

Then Mrs. Haroldson drew forth from one of her repositories an old blotting case, and sat down to write, bending her head very low over her paper—perhaps that her husband might not see the tears that dropped on it. But the precaution was unnecessary, for he kept his eyes steadily averted, and lay with his face to the wall, caressing the hand of his little Minnie, which the child had slipped into his in a mute appeal for sympathy.

About an hour after this, Captain Pullyn coming from Hollsworth towards the farm, overtook Mrs. Haroldson on the point of entering her house from the same direction.

‘Hollo, Mrs. Haroldson,’ he said, as he held open the garden-gate to let her pass; ‘if you had told me this morning you had an errand in the village, I’d have been very pleased to save you the trouble.’

She had been too much absorbed hitherto to notice him, and started when she heard his voice.

‘I—I have been posting a letter,’ she stammered, and looked almost guilty in her confusion.

‘I’m afraid you think me a troublesome old fellow for poking my nose so often where I’m not wanted,’ said the captain as they went indoors, ‘but perhaps this time I may be a trifle of use. You were saying in the morning it was a pity for the little ’uns to be in the house while all this is going on, and so it is; and if it had been as square with the weekly bills at my lodgings as it was afore the Grand Consolidated went to the bottom, I’d have taken ’em away with me then and there afore you could say Jack Robinson. Howsoever, I’ve been back and had a grand palavar with my landlady—a regular tough old figure-head she is—and she says she’s willing to let me take ’em home for a week or two. What do you say, Mrs. Haroldson? You shall see

'em every day, and I'll warrant to make 'em happy. Hollo! my hearties, where are you off to? I can't set sail without my first and second mates, you know.'

'They are upstairs,' said Mrs. Haroldson. 'But—but don't call them, please; they would only be tantalised.'

Alas! how sorely was she tantalised herself! For she felt that had this offer come an hour earlier Minnie might have been hers still.

'Tantalised! who wants to tantalise 'em?' said the captain. 'You don't think I've been saying all this to back out of it, do you?'

'Oh no! but . . . Dear Captain Pullyn, don't think me ungrateful for your kindness—I can never forget it, but' . . .

'But what? Come, out with it.'

'We have made another arrangement,' she said, looking very pale. And then, bit by bit, the poor woman came out with her story; how her sister had offered them help on condition of gaining possession of Minnie, how at first they had refused, preferring all extremities to such a sacrifice, and how at last the child herself had unconsciously extorted their consent. But vainly she sought the captain's eye for a sign of approval. He shook his head, and looked more stern than ever she had seen him.

'It was for the darling's own good,' she protested feverishly. 'Whatever comes of it, it was done for her good.'

'It cannot be for her good that she should learn to forget her father and mother,' responded the captain gravely.

In spite of his benevolence, he had a touch of sternness in his nature which made him come out with harsh things occasionally.

The next moment the sight of Mrs. Haroldson's white woe-

begone face made him sorry he had said so much, and, feeling that it was cruel to give reasons against a step already taken, he put out his hand and strode away with a hoarse 'God bless you.'

No sooner did she find herself alone than the poor mother staggered into a chair, and let her head fall forward on her clasped hands with a groan of pain. The captain's words pressed upon her brain like lead. Could it be that in rending her soul in twain she had not even compassed that which she sought—the good of the child whom she desired to rescue from the ills of her own fate? Could it be that she condemned her daughter to suffer a poverty worse than that represented by forced sales and sheriffs' officers—the poverty of the heart? She dared not examine the question too closely. Be it as it might, it was too late to retract now. And then was it not possible, nay probable, that Minnie might not learn to forget her father and mother after all, that she might elect to return to them at the end of her six months' probation?

Probable or possible, the mother's heart clung to the hope which this chance left her, as a drowning man clings to the plank which may save him, or may but prolong his agony.

CHAPTER VI.

DELIVERED AS PER CONTRACT.

ONE day, about a week after Mrs. Haroldson had signified her consent to her sister's offer, the Fanshawe carriage, with the powdered coachman and footman appertaining thereto, once more stood at the farm-house gate, while in the farm-house kitchen there sat a prim maid-servant taking

a very disparaging survey of her surroundings. This was the day appointed for Minnie's induction into her new home, whither the carriage and the powdered coachman and footman and the prim maid-servant were waiting to convey her.

In strange contrast to all this pomp of claret-coloured panels, white silk calves, gold lace and flaunting ribbons, was a scene taking place the while in a room upstairs—the room where John Haroldson had lain for so many weeks, and still lay, for he had made but little progress during the last few days, and had not yet found energy or strength to leave his bed. Mrs. Haroldson, her eyes all red and swollen with weeping, was kneeling before Minnie, investing her with a neat little hat and pelisse on which the mother's fingers had been busy some days before in anticipation of the occasion. Minnie herself, just beginning to realise the fact that she was to leave father and mother and Amy for an indefinite time and to go alone among strangers, was crying bitterly at the prospect; while Amy, not understanding very well what was the matter, stood by looking at her sister with vague affrighted interest, such as may be felt in a victim ordered out for execution.

On the bed lay John Haroldson, his face turned towards the wall, and the bedclothes huddled round his head as though to shut out sight and sound. But they could not have been quite effectual for the purpose, for every now and then something would be said to make the apparently inanimate form perceptibly wince.

'I don't want to go to Aunt Fanshawe's,' protested Minnie through her tears—'not unless father and mother and Amy go too. Tell them I won't—tell them I want to stop behind with father and mother and Amy.'

‘Minnie will be very happy with Aunt Fanshawe,’ said the mother tremulously.

She almost broke down as she uttered the word, remembering what the consequences would only too probably be if they came true. She was a mother whose happiness had hitherto consisted in that of her children, and yet how fervently she hoped that her encouraging prophecy might be falsified!

‘Aunt Fanshawe will be very kind to Minnie, I dare say. She is very rich, you know, and will make Minnie rich too.’

‘I don’t want to be rich. I am rich enough already. Send them away, mother, and I’ll be so good—you can’t think how good I’ll be.’

At that moment Mrs. Haroldson would have given everything she possessed to have been able to rescind the fatal contract into which her sister had tempted her.

But what could she do? Mrs. Fanshawe had fulfilled her share of the engagement; a couple of hundreds had been advanced, the bailiffs had been got rid of, and Minnie could not now be retained without a flagrant breach of faith.

‘Minnie has always been good—Minnie has always been mother’s own little treasure. But mother has promised to let you go and see Aunt Fanshawe.’

The agony of grief and self-reproach which that promise cost her now! She bent over the child on the pretext of arranging the bows of the jaunty hat, in reality to conceal the tears which rose, scalding and blinding, to her eyes.

‘Minnie will have a great many pretty things given her to play with,’ she went on in a choking voice—‘prettier a great deal than what father and mother would be able to buy for her.’

‘Yes, but father and mother and Amy won’t be able to

see them, will they?' argued Minnie. 'I shan't care for them else. I'll break them,' she added with a passionate stamp of her little foot, and then there was a new burst of tears.

'Hush, darling, hush! Minnie must be good. Minnie must not spoil her things.'

'Will father and mother and Amy help me to play with them?' persisted the child.

'No, pet. But don't cry—perhaps Minnie will come back one day soon and tell us all about them.'

Minnie looked up eagerly.

'Come back! When? To-morrow?'

'Not to-morrow, darling. But some day, perhaps—if Minnie wishes it.'

The mother drew the little face towards hers, and covered it with kisses. She felt the child's tears hot on her cheek, and was almost comforted; surely when the time came Minnie could not fail to wish it.

'We must not keep them waiting too long,' she resumed with more courage in her voice. 'Come and say good-bye to dear father.'

She led her daughter to the bedside. The sick man raised himself, and, throwing his arms round the little neck, strained the child silently to his breast, with a fierce energy more eloquent than any words—so eloquent that, young as she was, Minnie knew that it wrung his heart to let her go from him. Instinctively she understood that the parting was an occasion even more calamitous than she had deemed; and, filled with grief and undefined terror, broke into a very tempest of sobbing.

'Father, don't let me go! Father, father! I want to stay with father.'

John Haroldson groaned aloud; and his wife fearing the consequences of prolonged agitation for his shattered nerves, hurried the child from the room.

‘Come down, darling, or you will make father ill again. Don’t cry—I can’t bear to see my Minnie cry.’

But in spite of all exhortations, Minnie cried and sobbed wildly all the way downstairs, not ceasing till she reached the august presence of the prim maid-servant, and then only in pure terror.

With admirable good-breeding, this personage, though secretly filled with scorn for what she saw of Mr. Haroldson’s house-keeping, rose with an air that was almost respectful.

‘The young lady is ready now, ma’am, I suppose?’

‘Very nearly,’ said the mother, stooping to wipe the tear-drops off the ribbons that tied Minnie’s hat. ‘My darling, only see what you have been doing. Minnie mustn’t cry any more.’

She rubbed the ribbons with her handkerchief, and the maid-servant looked on the while with a mild expression of tolerant contempt. Mrs. Haroldson had expended a great deal of time and taste on the fabrication of the little hat; but this fastidious critic saw at once that the shape was last year’s, and that the ribbons were not of the fashionable colour, and did not therefore understand the fuss that was being made about it.

‘It is a sad trial for her to part with us,’ said Mrs. Haroldson, looking up deprecatingly into the Abigail’s unsympathising face. ‘You see she has never been from home before.’

‘Oh indeed!’ was the gracious response.

‘But I tell her that you will all be very kind to her, and

so you will, I am sure. She is so very little, you know, to go among strangers.'

The words were spoken in a beseeching tone that was not lost on the person to whom they were addressed, and the slighting estimate she had already formed of Mrs. Haroldson fell some degrees lower still.

'Oh! we shall be sure to be very kind to her. Are you ready now, miss?'

'I have only this one glove to put on,' said Mrs. Haroldson in a husky voice. 'Keep your hand steady, darling, or I can't manage it.'

But her own hand was far unsteadier than the child's. And no wonder, for she was asking herself whether she would ever fit a glove on those dear little fingers again.

'There is no hurry of course,' said the other, in tones implying that there was the greatest hurry possible. 'Only that missis dines at seven, and particularly wishes to see the young lady before then.'

'We are quite ready now. Darling, come and let mother help to put you into the carriage. Minnie will like a ride in the nice carriage, won't she?'

Between her awe of the prim maid-servant and the exhaustion left by her previous fit of crying, Minnie seemed half stupified, and passively resigned herself while her mother carried her out to the garden-gate. It was only at the very last, when the tall footman laid his hand on her to help her up the carriage-steps, that she made a movement of resistance, clinging to her mother's neck with a vehemence that made poor Mrs. Haroldson's heart thrill with the worst pang it had known yet.

But there was no cure for it now; the clasp of the tiny arms was gently undone, and the reluctant child, weeping

anew, was seated beside Mrs. Fanshawe's delegate in Mrs. Fanshawe's carriage, while the tall footman sprang up behind and the coachman flourished his whip.

For a few seconds more the mother stood at the garden-gate smiling—she was determined that the last Minnie saw of her should be a smile. Then gradually a look of intense pain came across her face, making the still parted lips quiver, and almost reeling she made her way back to the house. The first object she saw was Minnie's doll, Selina, lying on the floor where the child had left it when called away to be dressed for the journey. It was an old battered thing with a broken nose and a dishevelled tow wig which Mrs. Haroldson had smiled at scores of times. But now the sight of this ugly sawdust-filled image seemed to rend her very heart-strings; she sat down beside it and burst into a flood of bitter tears.

So violent was her grief that little Amy, who had been lurking behind the door in hiding from the strangers, came forth in wonder to ask if mother had been naughty.

The poor woman rose to her feet with an effort at composure.

'Not naughty, dear—it was done for the best, God knows. But foolish, I am afraid—very, very foolish.'

She wiped her eyes, and, with a resolute attempt to be calm, went upstairs to her husband. He was lying very still as she entered—so still that at first she almost fancied that he must be sleeping. But it was not so, for presently he said—in a voice so strange and unnatural that she scarcely recognised it for his:

'Do you think she will come back to us, Polly? I shall never be my own man again if she doesn't.'

Mrs. Haroldson made no answer; she dared not trust her trembling lips to form one. But she felt that, for herself, if Minnie did not come back to them she must surely die.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. FANSHAWE'S NURSERY.

TO the great disgust of the prim maid-servant, Minnie cried persistently during the first half of the journey to Mrs. Fanshawe's, steadily and even sullenly rejecting all that functionary's attempted blandishments, and only redoubling her lamentations at suggestions of what her aunt would think of her for being so naughty. But time was more efficacious than the admonitions of her companion. Towards the end of the long drive Minnie had gradually become quiet, and, when at last she found herself passing through the busy streets of St. Austin's, she had so far recovered that wonder and curiosity began to assert themselves through her grief. She was still in sore trouble and tribulation, but through it all she could not help noticing the fine shops—so much bigger and grander than any she had yet seen—and inwardly marvelling at their magnificence. More amazed still she became presently when the carriage, which had now left the streets a little way behind, turned into a pretty road bordered by large white houses which stood each by itself in the middle of a beautiful garden, stopping at the gate of what seemed the most beautiful garden and largest house of them all.

Before she had summoned courage to ask what manner of place this was which looked so grand and yet so pleasantly inviting, the carriage had rolled up a broad gravelled sweep, and stood before a flight of white stone steps that led up to

the house between vases full of flowers and ferns. Quick as thought the carriage-door was flung open by the tall footman, while from the house appeared another tall footman, who looked like the twin brother of the first, only that Minnie had never before seen twins with white hair. She found herself being lifted out by one or both of them and deposited on the stone steps, and then she understood that the beautiful garden and large house were Aunt Fanshawe's.

Poor little Minnie! she felt terribly lonely and helpless standing in that strange place with strange faces around her, and the knowledge that father and mother and Amy were left miles and miles behind; and she was wofully disposed to begin crying again. But she knew that the eyes of the two tall footmen were upon her, and dared not—absolutely dared not. So, mute as a mouse, she suffered her duenna to take hold of her hand and conduct her up the steps into the house.

Here she found herself in a large hall—a room as it seemed to her—with mahogany chairs ranged on each side, and coats and hats hanging like gigantic leaves from the branches of a huge tree-shaped stand; while before her was a broad staircase covered with a thick carpet of complicated pattern, complicated still further by the colours cast on it by the sunbeams shining through a stained glass window on the first landing. The place was very solemn to Minnie—solemn in its dim rich lighting, solemn in its carpet-muffled echoes, solemn even in the close upholsterer's-shop smell which, crossed with a faint odour of cut flowers, seemed to impregnate the whole atmosphere with respectability and decorum. Her heart was very full, but she felt the same obligation not to cry here as she was wont to feel on Sundays at church.

This sense of what was due to her surroundings was increased rather than diminished when her conductress opened a door leading out of the hall, and ushered her into the temple where her aunt sat.

It was a handsome drawing-room with long folding windows opening on the garden, and the furniture and decorations were of an order of magnificence that Minnie had never even imagined possible. There was a great deal of gilding, and a great deal of looking-glass, and yards upon yards of silk hangings and gold fringes, and altogether an amount of splendour which made the child shrink into herself as a snail into its shell. In the midst sat Aunt Fanshawe, arrayed in a rustling silk dress, and looking so stately from the reflected glory of her belongings that Minnie felt twice as much afraid of her as when they had met in the farm-house kitchen.

To her, however, Aunt Fanshawe, awe-inspiring as she was in her grandeur, was evidently disposed to be gracious.

‘Come in, my dear child,’ she said encouragingly, seeing that Minnie seemed inclined to linger on the threshold. ‘Harris, if your master has come home, go and tell him that I wish him to step this way.’

Harris, which was the name of the prim maid-servant who had been appointed Minnie’s special attendant, departed on her errand, leaving her charge to feel more hopelessly forlorn than ever. The child would never have had courage to pilot her way through the curiously fashioned chairs and richly inlaid tables to her aunt, but her aunt made things easy by coming to her instead.

‘Sit down, my dear,’ and Mrs. Fanshawe placed herself on a sofa and drew her niece to her side. ‘And now tell me how do you like to be here?’

Minnie's lip quivered strangely but, but she made no answer.

'You must not be shy with me, my little darling. You are to be very fond of me, you know, and I shall be very fond of you. It will be very nice, will it not?'

On finding herself addressed thus kindly, Minnie's lip quivered more and more; and she was just about to burst into a flood of tears little expected by her aunt, when the door opened and a gentleman appeared whose entrance forced back the tears to their source anew.

He was a very tall gentleman, taller even than the white-haired footmen, and he had a bald patch on the top of his head which struck the child as peculiarly impressive. He had a pair of very large grey whiskers and wore a white neckcloth, and this to Minnie completed his description. Whether because of his height, or his bald patch, or his grey whiskers, or his white neckcloth, she felt very much afraid of him, especially when he came and stood close to where she sat, staring at her.

'This is the little girl, Henry,' said Mrs. Fanshawe, laying her hand on Minnie's head. 'A dear little thing, isn't she, and very like me?'

'So I should say,' answered the gentleman, and continued staring rather unmeaningly.

'I knew you would think so, Henry. See, my dear, this gentleman is your uncle Fanshawe.'

Minnie said nothing, but looked up into his face with her round blue eyes as if fascinated—not in a complimentary sense, however, but quite the reverse.

'Why can't you say something, Henry?'

'I have nothing to say, my dear,' responded the gentleman, languidly. 'The Bank have raised the rate again, but you don't care for that.'

‘No, I don’t,’ said Mrs. Fanshawe, tartly. ‘I mean the child, why can’t you find something to talk to her about?’

The gentleman looked very much perplexed, but obediently set himself to consider, and at length brought out:

‘I hope you are quite well to-day.’

Minnie hardly knew at first whether this was intended for her or not, but, on being coaxingly admonished by Mrs. Fanshawe to speak to her uncle, managed to respond with a feeble ‘Yes, thank you.’

The gentleman paused, quite at a loss how to carry on the conversation. At last a bright thought struck him, and he asked:

‘How old are you, little girl, and what is your name?’

She was again admonished by her aunt, and presently answered, rather more fluently this time, for it was according to established formula:

‘Six years old last birthday, and my name is Minnie Haroldson.’

‘And a very nice name too,’ said her aunt, graciously. ‘But don’t you fancy that perhaps Minna sounds prettier—more important, you know? I think in future it must be Minna, what do you say, dear?’

The child did not answer; the first terror inspired by the strange gentleman was gradually wearing off, and the little eyes were beginning to fill again.

‘And talking of names, don’t you think Fanshawe is a very pretty name?’ went on her aunt, musingly. ‘Good gracious, child, what’s the matter?’

She had just discovered that Minnie’s eyes were full of tears, which now began to drop very fast on the ribbons her mother had arranged so carefully.

‘What are you crying for? what do you want?’ demanded Mrs Fanshawe, in amazement.

‘I want to go home,’ said Minnie, breaking at this into a piteous howl. ‘I want to go home to father and mother and Amy.’

‘Hush, hush, I am quite shocked. This is your home now, my dear—don’t you think it is a very nice one?’

‘I want father and mother and Amy,’ repeated Minnie, sobbing. ‘I want’ . . .

‘My dear child, how can you go on so? you ought to know better, really. Don’t cry any more, my love—I will be your mama, and this gentleman your papa.’

She tried to put her arm round the child as she spoke, but Minnie pushed it roughly away with both hands.

‘You shan’t,’ the little voice cried impetuously. ‘I don’t want you to be my mamma, and I won’t let you. Oh dear! where are father and mother and Amy? Oh dear! dear!’

A succession of violent sobs drowned her further utterance, and Mrs. Fanshawe looked dubiously at her husband; she was beginning to question the success of her experiment,

‘Who would have thought of her having such a passionate temper? What a dreadful noise, to be sure! it seems to go through my very head. My dear, dear child, do have a little pity for my nerves. We shall be so happy if you will only be quiet.’

But Minnie, instead of being quiet, redoubled the vehemence of her lamentations, turning away from her aunt’s attempted caresses almost as though resenting them.

‘Do you know I begin to fear she is rather heartless?’ said the lady, and her countenance was very blank.

Mr. Fanshawe, who made a point of agreeing with his wife in everything, said he feared so too, and they both looked

at Minnie as though they could have wished her considerably further.

At this point—a very critical one in Minnie's career—the door was suddenly flung open by one of the tall footmen, and at the same moment a stentorian voice announced:

‘Mrs. Vesey and Miss Vesey.’

Minnie had been sitting near the door, and the stentorian voice sounded close at her ear. Her first impression was that the tall footman had come to do something dreadful to her, and the idea was so terrible as to petrify her into silence at once, with her eyes turned towards the door in trembling expectation of what was to happen next. When she found that he did not advance further into the room and only held the door open long enough to admit a gorgeous lady, rustling louder if possible than Aunt Fanshawe, followed by a little girl two or three years older than herself—but oh! so much more grandly dressed—she transferred her awe-struck interest to them instead, and sat watching their movements in mute puzzled wonderment.

‘Mrs. Vesey!’ cried Mrs. Fanshawe, starting from her seat with hospitable enthusiasm. ‘I am so very, very glad to see you. And you have brought your little girl too, I see—a sweet child she looks, to be sure. Now this is what I call really kind.’

Mrs. Fanshawe's raptures were on this occasion quite genuine. The visitor was not rich, was indeed poor as compared to the Fanshawes; but in right of her position as the daughter of a baronet of good family she was one of the acknowledged leaders of St. Austin's society, and the rich merchant's wife had been for years dying to get on her visiting list. This had at last been accomplished by the good offices of a common friend, and Mrs. Fanshawe, who

had made her first call a few days before, was in unfeigned ecstasy to find it so quickly returned.

‘You are very good, I’m sure,’ said Mrs. Vesey, who was aware of the increasing importance of Mr. Fanshawe’s commercial position, and considered the family decidedly worth cultivation. ‘My dear Arabella, shake hands with Mr. and Mrs. Fanshawe.’

At this moment she became aware of a pair of wondering blue eyes which, opened to their widest extent, were gazing at her, half curiously, half affrightedly, from behind Mrs. Fanshawe’s ample skirts.

‘What a beautiful child!’ she exclaimed, almost involuntarily. ‘You must be very proud of her, Mrs. Fanshawe, I am sure. And do you know I see a great likeness to her mamma?’

‘She is considered very like me,’ said Mrs. Fanshawe, with a sudden flush of gratification. The implied compliment to her good looks was very pleasant, but more delicious to her still, perhaps, was the maternal dignity with which her visitor’s hypothesis had for the moment invested her. ‘But—but—I have no family of my own, Mrs. Vesey. She is the daughter of a—a relation—a distant relation, that is—and is only staying with me on a visit. However, she is a dear little girl, and I am very fond of her.’

She looked down very complacently on her little niece, to whom she felt almost grateful for the compliment which the child had been the means of obtaining for her. And then how signally Mrs. Vesey’s admiration of Minnie confirmed her own discernment and good taste!

But Minnie did not respond to the complacent look at all, and was so manifestly on the point of outraging decorum

by a new fit of crying that her aunt rang the bell in some alarm, telling the footman who answered it:

‘Thomas, send Harris to take Miss Minna up to the nursery.’

Harris made her appearance, and Minnie was removed, happily without scandal in the shape of fresh tears, and her aunt explained:

‘She has only just arrived from a distance, and is sadly tired with her journey, poor dear child. I am so glad you are pleased with her, Mrs. Vesey. For myself, I have taken a prodigious fancy to her. In fact (between ourselves this is), I have serious thoughts of adopting her, for I lead a terribly dull life sometimes—with Mr. Fanshawe out all day, and even when he is at home so engrossed in business that he has hardly a word to say to me.’

She darted a reproachful look at Mr. Fanshawe, who cowered guiltily.

‘It would be a very good plan,’ said Mrs. Vesey sympathisingly. ‘A child is *such* a companion, you know. What I should do without my Arabella, for instance, I am sure I have no idea.’

The remark had the effect of making Arabella the subject of conversation; and, after a few minutes spent in discussing that young lady, her dispositions, and acquirements, Mrs. Vesey departed, very favourably impressed by the style in which her new friend lived. Mr. Fanshawe, much relieved, went back to his study to finish an elaborate calculation turning on the probable price of Scotch pig that day three weeks, and Mrs. Fanshawe was left to herself, thinking:

‘There may be a good deal of trouble with her at first, I dare say, but keep her I must and will.’

And thus resolving she went upstairs to the nursery.

It was quite an event for Mrs. Fanshawe, this going upstairs for the first time to her nursery. She had never had a nursery before, and the consciousness that such a sanctuary was at last hers—actually existed on the second floor of her own house, with a little inmate in it ready-made just at the age when children begin to be interesting without giving too much trouble—thrilled her with an entirely new feeling of dignity and importance. The ordering of Miss Minna up to the nursery in the presence of Mrs. Vesey had been one of the grand sensations of her life.

Mrs. Fanshawe's nursery was a very pleasant room—light and airy, situated in the most cheerful part of the house, and carefully fitted with all suitable appointments under her own superintendence. The evening was fine and sunny and Mrs. Fanshawe thought she had never looked at a more charming interior than now when she peeped in and saw the warm evening light shining on its bright-coloured paper and gay chintz hangings, and little golden-haired Minnie sitting at tea near one of the open windows. She was not quite so much pleased, however, a moment afterwards, when on advancing she found that Minnie was not eating, but slowly letting one big tear after another fall on a huge slice of bread and butter which she held intact in her hand. Still, remembering the gratifying scene downstairs, Mrs. Fanshawe would not let herself be disheartened.

‘Why, Minna dear,’ she said, going up and taking a seat at the tea-table, ‘I am afraid you don’t seem to be getting on very well with your tea. What’s the matter?’

‘I’m not hungry,’ said Minnie, staring dolefully at her bread and butter, and letting fall another tear.

‘But you ought to be hungry, my love, after all you have done to-day. Harris, bring out the jam; I wonder you did

not think of giving the poor child a little this evening. You like jam, dear, don't you?"

'Yes, I like jam,' said Minnie a little ungraciously. She was not in the mood to let herself be coaxed if she could help it; still a fact was a fact, and not to be controverted.

'Put down that great crust, dear, and I'll cut a nice delicate little slice for you myself, with plenty of jam on it. There, just taste that, Minna, and tell me how you like it.'

Minnie took a languid bite in obedience to her aunt's injunctions. The bread was new and the jam laid on very thickly, and as she had not tasted anything since the morning, she found herself more interested than a moment before she could have supposed.

'Well, my dear, it is very nice, isn't it?'

'Very nice,' said Minnie, and took another bite on her own account. She went on munching for a minute or two in silence, to Mrs. Fanshaw's infinite satisfaction, then at last, addressing her aunt for the first time spontaneously, said:

'Aunt Fanshawe.'

'Well, my love?'

'I may go home to-morrow to father and mother and Amy, mayn't I?'

Her aunt was rather staggered by the question; she was afraid of negating it too decidedly in case of a repetition of the stormy scene interrupted by Mrs. Vesey's visit.

'To-morrow, dear? Well, I don't think it must be quite so soon as to-morrow. To-morrow I was intending to take you out with me to look at some of the pretty shops, and to see if we could find anything in them that you would like for your own. Did you ever see a talking doll, Minna?'

The child opened her eyes with astonishment.

‘A talking doll! But dolls don’t talk.’

‘Oh yes! they do — some of them. I know a shop — I was thinking of taking you there to-morrow — where there are large dolls as big as real babies, that can open and shut their eyes and say “Mamma” quite plainly. You would like such a doll as that, wouldn’t you, dear?’

Minnie’s eyes, which had been opening wider and wider at the description, were dropped shyly at this; she paused, and then murmured very timidly:

‘Yes, please.’

‘That’s right, dear; then you shall go with me to-morrow and choose one.’

The child’s face flushed with pleasure. She pondered a little, and then said:

‘And when I go home may I take it with me? Amy will be so surprised — I dare say at first she will think it is a real baby.’

‘I dare say. But as Amy lives so far off, perhaps we had better go first and show it to some of the nice little girls I know at St. Austin’s. I shall take you to-morrow to pay them a visit, and we shall ask two or three of them to come and dine with you. And after dinner, Minna, we shall all go together to see Herr Schleitowand.’

‘I don’t know what that is.’

‘Herr Schleitowand is a very clever gentleman who is staying here a few days to show the people of St. Austin’s what he can do. And he can do such wonderful things — you will be quite surprised. What do you think of him making a plum-pudding in a hat, Minna? — mixing it, and boiling it, and turning it out quite ready — and all in less than five minutes.’

‘But he couldn’t,’ said Minnie, incredulously. ‘I am quite

sure he couldn't. Make a pudding in a hat! nobody could do that, you know.'

'You shall see him do it to-morrow, Minna, and he will give you a slice to taste.'

Minnie became transfixed with amazement, which increased as her aunt went on:

'But that is not nearly all he does. He can tear a pocket-handkerchief in two, and then with a wave of his hand mend it again so that you can't see the join; he can put a knife into his mouth and swallow it, and bring it out again presently at his wrist; and he can make a shilling dance on the table as if it were alive.'

Minnie had been holding her breath with wonder, and came out now with a great panting 'Oh!' necessary for the relief alike of her lungs and her bewildered faculties. This was followed by an interval of silence, during which she was collecting her ideas and otherwise recovering herself, and then she added with great decision:

'I should like to see him very much.'

'We are going there to-morrow, my love.'

'It will be very nice,' rejoined Minnie emphatically. 'Dear me! only fancy what father and mother will say when they hear where I have been. Do you think they ever saw him?'

'I can't say, I'm sure.'

'I know Amy never did. I wonder what she will think when I tell her. Make a plum-pudding in a hat — the idea! And swallow a knife — how dreadful! Doesn't it hurt him very much?'

'I don't suppose it does, dear, or he wouldn't do it.'

'But it must look dreadful to see him, must it not? I think Amy would be quite frightened. Oh dear! I wish it was to-morrow already.'

She made a quick petulant little movement of impatience, and her aunt smiled with inward gratification. Just then there was heard a knock at the nursery door, and a servant entered to say that dinner was served downstairs. Mrs. Fanshawe knew that her husband did not like to be kept waiting for dinner, and, indulgent to this little weakness, rose at once.

‘I must say good-night now, Minna, you will be in bed by the time I have finished dinner. will you kiss me, and say good-night?’

Minnie held up her mouth without hesitation.

‘Good-night, Aunt Fanshawe. What a very funny gentleman that must be!’

‘Yes, I am sure you will think so when you see him. But can’t you call me something else than always Aunt Fanshawe, dear? It is such a long name.’

‘It is your name, isn’t it?’ said Minnie, looking puzzled.

‘Yes, but you must find something else to call me by for short. Call me Mamma. Mamma is so much shorter than Aunt Fanshawe.’

‘But you are not mamma,’ reasoned Minnie. ‘Mamma is mother’s name, only I say mother instead.’

‘Never mind, dear, call me mamma, it is so much shorter.’

‘You are not mamma,’ obstinately persisted the child.

‘But you can call me mamma, can’t you?’ retorted Mrs. Fanshawe, a little sharply. ‘Come, my sweet child, let me hear you say it — Good-night, mamma.’

‘No, I won’t,’ said Minnie rebelliously.

The little mouth began to work ominously, and Mrs. Fanshawe understood that if she persisted further she would

have all the work of pacification to re-commence. So with a forced laugh she gave up her point.

‘You little funny thing! Well, call me Aunt Fanshawe or anything you like. And now good-night; Harris will give you the rest of your tea — take care she has what she likes, Harris — and at breakfast I shall come and talk to you again, and tell you what more I can remember about this clever gentleman we are going to see.’

She kissed the child again, and hurried from the room, leaving Minnie to finish her tea and question Harris concerning the wonderful gentleman who swallowed knives and made plum-puddings in his hat.

This topic, combined with hunger and bread and jam, proved so interesting that Minnie cried no more during the meal, nor indeed afterwards until she was being tucked up in her little bed for the night. Then she remembered that she had always till now been tucked up by her mother’s hands, and the absence of those hands — so kind, so caressing, and so dexterous at their task — made the hot tears flow forth anew. They continued to flow long after Harris had left her alone in the prettily furnished little bedroom leading out of the nursery — the most prettily furnished room in which she had ever slept — long after the light of the summer evening had melted into dusk, even after dusk had darkened into night.

But Nature came at last to her relief, and in pure exhaustion she fell asleep, dreaming that Amy had been changed by the clever gentleman into a talking doll.

CHAPTER VIII.

‘HARK, HOW I’LL BRIBE YOU.’

THE programme arranged by Mrs. Fanshawe was carried out in all its details next day, with general satisfaction to those concerned.

Minnie was taken to the best toy-shop of St. Austin’s, and there presented with the largest and most fashionably dressed doll to be found on the premises — one which possessed the further recommendation of emitting under certain conditions a discordant and unearthly noise, more resembling the quack of a duck than any other sound known in nature. After this purchase, and such a survey of the remaining wonders of the establishment as might be supposed to whet a desire to return on a future occasion, she was taken round to be introduced to a select circle of young friends, by whose society her aunt hoped to supply the companionship of Amy. Then came dinner, and afterwards a visit to Herr Schleitowand’s, where the child sat spell-bound with astonishment and curiosity—the marvels of the performance surpassing her wildest imaginings. There was no time to cry for home that day, even had she felt so disposed, but indeed she was far too much excited and interested to do anything except open her eyes very wide and ask a multiplicity of questions. Not that she had ceased to think of father and mother and Amy, for she was chattering about them constantly, but her thoughts of them seemed to be all coloured by the interests of the day. Instead of impatiently asking when she should return to them, she was always speculating on whether they could have seen this, that, or the other thing, and what they

would say of it if they had. Evidently she would have preferred for the present that they should come to her rather than that she should go back to them.

Aunt Fanshawe noted the change of tone, and was well satisfied. She would have been better pleased doubtless if the refrain of father and mother and Amy had recurred less frequently; but her experience of yesterday had taught her to be content with making slow approaches towards her object. Thus she did not thwart the child in speaking of the three persons who had hitherto constituted her world, nor did she commit the mistake of laying claim to any nearer and dearer title than that of Aunt Fanshawe.

That evening Minnie cried herself to sleep again—the foolish tears would break forth when she found herself in her lonely bed with no mother's face watching her—but sleep came much more speedily than the night before.

Another day followed, and another and another, and it was always contrived that Minnie should be interested and amused. Now it was a visit to the toy-shop to buy a peep-show; now it was a mysterious summons to come and look at something waiting for her in the garden—the 'something' proving to be an exquisite little Shetland pony bought expressly for Minnie's riding; now it was an entertainment given by her to her little friends, the chief feature of which was that real tea was served in china cups no bigger than a walnut-shell; now it was a magic-lantern exhibition; now a travelling circus; and so forth in never-ending variety.

Time passed on, and Minnie gradually began to bring the familiar home names less frequently into her conversation; and indeed it was not wonderful, considering how much else she had to think about, and talk about. Every now and then, it is true, she would be seized with a fit

of home sickness, and ask very wistfully when she was to see father and mother and Amy again; on which she would always be told that they were all quite well, and that father and mother would be glad to hear she was a good girl and did not fret. She found out by degrees that all her questionings and petitionings on this point did nothing to procure for her what she wanted, and slowly accustomed herself to transfer them to objects which she had a better chance of attaining.

At last she learned to fall asleep at night without crying, while in the day her laugh began to be heard without any particular pains being taken to excite it. The sound of that spontaneous, joyous laugh was like music in Mrs. Fanshawe's ears.

Weeks passed, then months, and Minnie had been living in her aunt's house for what seemed to her an incalculable period of time—so long that the idea of home, when she recalled it, appeared to be seen through a mist, as the memory of dream, while her new life, so uncomfortably strange and unfamiliar at first, had grown to be the most natural and matter-of-course thing in the world.

One day—long as the time looked to Minnie, it was in reality a little less than six months from the date of her arrival at St. Austin's—Mrs. Fanshawe called her, and asked her what she thought of getting up a ball for her little friends.

'A ball!' cried Minnie, her eyes sparkling with delight. 'A ball like what you went to last week, where they dance and play music and eat supper all night long! Oh Aunt Fanshawe, you don't mean that, do you?'

'Yes, I do, my dear. I have a list here of all the little boys and girls whom you might ask, and I find there would

be more than fifty. I would have the carpet up in the drawing-room and the floor chalked, and festoons of flowers put up over the doorways—just as I told you they had at Mrs. Robinson's. And then there would be supper served in the dining-room, and'

'Aunt Fanshawe! do you really mean it?'

'Certainly, dear child. You do your steps so nicely now that I don't think there need be any hesitation about it. Suppose we drive round to-day to Miss Styles's, and ask her what sort of dress you ought to have? I was thinking that white tarlatane over a pink satin skirt, looped up with white or pink roses—with a pretty little wreath of something in your hair'

'For me—all that for me! And you really are not joking?'

'I never was more serious in my life. Do you think that would make a pretty dress?'

'Oh Aunt Fanshawe! it will be lovely!'

'Then suppose I sit down now and write out the invitations for this day fortnight? Look here, Minna, this is my list—I have not left any one out, have I?'

The child came forward, and, leaning against her aunt's knees (all the old awe had long ago worn off), cast her eyes on a paper which Mrs. Fanshawe held before her. It was headed 'List of Guests for Minna's Ball.'

There was something so charming in the conjunction of the two last words that Minnie's delight fairly overflowed.

'Oh! how beautiful it will be!' she cried, rocking herself rapturously to and fro. 'Won't it—won't it?'

She turned her bright little face up as she spoke. The movement brought her lips within a few inches of her aunt's—a proximity which seemed to be suggestive, for, as though

yielding to a sudden impulse, she put her arm round Mrs. Fanshawe's neck and kissed her.

It was the first time Minnie had kissed her unasked, and Mrs. Fanshawe was in ecstasy.

'You dear darling!' she exclaimed, holding the child clasped to her side. 'You are very much pleased then?'

'Oh yes! Aunt Fanshawe—very much indeed,' said Minnie gratefully.

And then she tried to release herself, but in vain.

'Aunt Fanshawe—always Aunt Fanshawe! "Mamma" is so much shorter. Come, Minna dear, let it be "Mamma."'

Minnie made no answer. Aunt Fanshawe was holding her rather uncomfortably, so that she could not turn her head, and she was impatient to look over the list of guests.

'Dear child,' whispered Mrs. Fanshawe, 'it shall be Mamma—shall it not? Say "Yes, mamma," there's a pet.'

'Yes, mamma,' said Minnie. The words were breathed in a very low voice, almost as if she were ashamed of them, but they were enough for Mrs. Fanshawe, over whose face came a glow of triumph and exultation.

And then Minnie got loose, and the debate on the approaching festivity was continued with new ardour.

For the next few days all was excitement and hubbub in Mrs. Fanshawe's house and Minnie's head. Nothing was said, or done, or thought of, that had not some bearing on the forthcoming great event. As for Minnie, sleeping and waking, her mind was running on satin skirts and tarlatanes, and artificial flowers, and white kid-shoes and open-worked silk stockings, and chalked floors and ornamented doorways, and long supper-tables, as constantly as though the giving of a ball was to her the great be-all and end-all of existence.

And so indeed it is pretty certain that for the time it was. But Mrs. Fanshawe never made any attempt to moderate the intensity of her expectation.

Day after day passed on, and the preparations for the great occasion gradually advanced towards maturity. The carpet in the drawing-room was taken up, the upholsterers were getting on with the decorations, the confectioner had received his orders about the supper, little programmes of the dances had been printed on satin paper, the musicians were engaged—in fine, all the necessary machinery had been set in motion and was working bravely. And at last, on the day before that fixed for the entertainment, Miss Styles sent home the dress.

What a triumph of art it looked, to be sure, as it lay spread on the couch in Mrs. Fanshawe's bedroom, with its rose-bud trimmings and flowing folds of tarlatane well shaken out and displayed in their fullest glory! And then the exquisite little wreath made to match which had been sent home with it! Minnie could not repress a shriek of enthusiasm at the sight.

‘How beautiful! And is that really for me? I shall be grander than anybody else in the room to-morrow evening, shan't I?’

‘I should think you would, my dear; it will become you beautifully, I am certain.’

‘That it will. I may try it on, mayn't I? Shall I run and call Harris to help me?’

‘Presently, dear. But sit down a few minutes by me. I have something to say to you first. Are you attending, Minna?’

‘Yes, Aunt Fan— yes, I mean,’ answered Minnie absently,

taking her eyes with difficulty off Miss Styles's *chef d'œuvre*.

She had not yet got into the habit of calling Mrs. Fanshawe mamma, but she conceded so far as seldom or never to use the more distant appellation to which her aunt objected.

'Minna, do you ever think of home now?'

Minnie started; she had been thinking very little of home for the last few days.

'Oh yes,' she answered, hanging her head a little. 'Dear me, what *would* father and mother and Amy say if they saw me in such a beautiful dress as that?'

'You were very anxious to return to them a few months ago. What would you think if I let you go back to-morrow morning?'

'Go back to see father and mother and Amy! Oh! I should like it so much!' and the childish blue eyes glistened at the prospect. 'But . . . but not to-morrow morning. To-morrow is the day of the ball, you know.'

'I know, my dear child, and I should be very sorry for you to lose the pleasure, I am sure. But if you go at all, it must be to-morrow morning.'

'To-morrow morning! But I can't—you know I can't,' argued Minnie, looking very much perplexed. 'The ball is to be to-morrow.'

'Oh! I should manage to make excuses for you to your little friends—you need not mind on that account. There will be plenty of them, you know, and what with dancing and supper, and talking and laughing, they won't miss you much, I dare say.'

Minnie's face looked awfully blank.

'I don't know what you mean,' she said after a pause,

during which she seemed half ready to cry. 'I must be at the ball—I must wear my beautiful new dress. Tell father and mother I can't come till the day after to-morrow.'

'It cannot be managed so, my love. It is necessary you should go home to-morrow morning, unless indeed you wish to stay with me altogether.'

Minnie looked at her new dress, and the tears began to gather in her eyes.

'I don't know what you mean,' she repeated, shaking her head helplessly.

'I will explain. When you came to me first, Minna, it was arranged that you should remain here six months, and that then you should make your choice between going home and staying with me always. This is the last day of the six months; to-morrow they will have quite run out; and your—your friends will expect to hear what you have decided. So you see I must ask you to make up your mind, my dear. What shall we write to them—that they may expect you to-morrow?'

'The day after to-morrow,' said Minnie.

'That will not do, my dear. If you stay over to-morrow, you must stay altogether. But that will be very pleasant, won't it? You wouldn't like to leave me, and your pretty pony, and your doll, and your magic-lantern, and all your nice little friends here, surely? And you know you would not be able to take any of them with you.'

'What! not Shetland?' said the child ruefully. 'But I could come and see him sometimes, you know—oh! I should come very often.'

'No, you would not,' rejoined Mrs. Fanshawe a little bitterly. 'If you go, I should send Shetland back to the man I bought him from, and give away all your playthings to poor little children who would know how to value them

better than you do. You would never see any of them again. As for your new dress, I think I know a little girl whom it would just fit,' she continued with a reflective air.

'But it is mine,' said Minnie, fairly crying by this time. 'I am to wear it at the ball.'

'Yes, if you make up your mind that you will remain to live with me—but not unless. Now you know what you have to choose, and you can answer. Will you stay here always, or go home to-morrow?'

Minnie looked very hard through her tears at the new dress.

'I will stay here, and go home sometimes to see father and mother and Amy. I should like to see them sometimes.'

'That will not do either, Minna. If you make up your mind to live with me, there must be no going home to see anybody. This will be your home, and you must not think of any other.'

'Don't father and mother want to see me then?' asked Minnie with a great burst of tears.

Mrs. Fanshawe turned very red, and hesitated for a moment. She had a conscience—such a conscience perhaps as shrinks from the *malum prohibitum* rather than from the *malum in se*, but still a conscience—and though she could manage a tolerable number of white lies, a downright falsehood stuck in her throat.

'It will be a great deal better for your father and mother—and Amy too—that you should stay with me,' she answered at last evasively; 'and if you do, it will not be proper or convenient for you to see them. You have been very happy without seeing them for the last six months, I am sure.'

‘Yes, but I want to see them again for all that, and it is very naughty of them not to want to see me too.’

‘They are rather ill off, my dear, and would find you very much in their way. Besides, it is for your own good that you should live here rather than there. If you go back to them, you would be poor and badly dressed and have no pretty playthings, but if you stay with me you shall have everything you want, and be a rich lady some day—as rich as I am.’

‘And then I may go and see them sometimes—when I am a rich lady like you—mayn’t I?’ asked the child eagerly.

‘Then? Oh yes! certainly—if you wish it. Well, Minna, what is to be done? Shall we let them know that you have chosen to stay with me always, or would you rather go away to-morrow and leave me to apologise to your young friends in the evening? You need not mind about your dress—I can easily find somebody to give it to.’

Minnie looked very much frightened.

‘No, no,’ she cried hastily, ‘I will stay. I would much rather stay.’

‘My own sweet pet!’ exclaimed Mrs. Fanshawe, folding the child delightedly to her breast. ‘You are a darling lamb, and you will look like a queen to-morrow night, that you will.’

But to her disappointment Minnie was crying still.

‘Don’t cry, love, don’t cry. Look, I shall ring for Harris and tell her you would like to have your nice new dress tried on.’

The dress was tried on, and, in the contemplation of her own pretty little figure decked out in satin and gauze and flowers, Minnie’s tears gradually dried. Somehow she was not quite happy, but she had neither time nor skill to ana-

lyse her sensations, and she knew she was going to look very magnificent to-morrow evening.

As for Mrs. Fanshawe, she was very happy indeed—as perfectly happy as a victorious general who has won a battle of which he was not quite sure, and who does not trouble himself with questions as to whether his strategy has been entirely according to the laws of regular warfare. For she knew now that Minnie was altogether hers; and Minnie had been ten times more to her during the past few months than ever had been all the Blenheims and parrots and pet-parsons and benighted heathens whose aid had hitherto supported her in the struggle with the tedium of existence.

CHAPTER IX.

WILD PRIMROSES.

THE next day John Haroldson was sitting by the fireside in the farm-house kitchen, resting his chin moodily on one hand, and with the other nervously fingering a bit of crumpled note-paper which lay crushed together in his palm.

It was the paper on which Minnie had copied out in large round-hand characters a neatly expressed little note composed for her by Mrs. Fanshawe, to the effect that she had been offered the alternative of returning to the farm or remaining permanently under her aunt's roof, and had decided on the latter course as the one most conducive to her happiness.

‘Unnatural, hard-hearted child!’ he muttered, and clenched his hand so tightly that the crushed paper rustled. ‘She never cared for us, not she. The fool I was to expect her home again!’

He had expected her home again confidently up to that morning—having, either from natural sanguineness of disposition or sheer cowardice, shut out all other possibilities from his calculations. Latterly he had even been counting the days and hours remaining of the period at the end of which, as he undoubtingly believed, she would be restored to him. And in proportion to the strength of his hope was the bitterness of his disappointment.

‘A fool indeed!’ he went on—‘a green ignorant fool. To be taken in by her kissing and her crying and her pretty clinging ways—to believe they meant anything more than just “Good-bye, I’m off.” And she may be off for me; she may make her home where she likes so long as it isn’t in my house. A cold, unnatural’

‘God bless her wherever she may be!’ broke in Mrs. Haroldson.

They were almost the first words she had spoken since the letter had arrived. Assuredly the blow had fallen on her no less sorely than on her husband, but she had breathed no syllable of reproach against her child.

Captain Pullyn—returned a few days before from the first voyage he had made since his misfortunes—had sat watching the scene hitherto in silence, but interposed at this.

‘God bless her, I say too, and steer her safe through the breakers—there are plenty of ’em ahead of her—poor little soul. Jack, you’re as big a fool as you call yourself, or you wouldn’t be thinking harm of the pretty creature for what’s no fault of hers. You may as well call it her fault that she’s six instead of sixteen. It ain’t unnatural what she’s done; it would have been unnatural if it had been anything different—as unnatural as an old head on young shoulders, or a three-decker’s guns aboard a fishing smack. If you

cut a little craft like that loose from her moorings, youv'e no business to be surprised that she drifts away from you.'

Mrs. Haroldson cast a grateful look at the captain; from her inmost heart she felt bounden to him for taking Minnie's part. And yet his words wounded even while they comforted. They exonerated Minnie, but by implication they blamed the parents who had exposed her to the temptation to which she had succumbed. The mother accepted the blame, feeling that she had deserved it, yet it cut her to the very soul notwithstanding.

But John Haroldson was not to be appeased by any argument of the captain's. He had set his heart upon the child, and his affection was as sensitive as it was deep.

'She never cared for us,' he insisted, 'she never cared for us. But I've found out my mistake, and there's an end of it.'

Mrs. Fanshawe was giving herself some uneasiness all this time lest Minnie's father should repent his bargain, and seek to enforce the claims which law and nature gave him to the possession of his child. She would have been vastly relieved could she have looked into his thoughts, for she would have known then that his feelings towards Minnie were no longer those of love and longing, but of a settled displeasure which was the best guarantee for her own undisturbed enjoyment of her newly acquired proprietary rights.

Meanwhile, for Minnie herself things were going on charmingly. Cognisant neither of her father's anger nor of her aunt's fears, she was able to give her whole mind to the extraction of as much happiness as possible from the long-looked-for festival got up in her honour. This went off to perfection, Minnie being the admired of all admirers, and,

in right of her toilet no less than of her quality of hostess, the acknowledged queen of the ball-room. So complete were all the arrangements, and so merry was the humour of the company, that she even enjoyed herself not very much less than she had expected, never thinking once of father and mother and Amy, or of the price she had paid for the evening's pleasure. The next day she had a headache and was rather fractious, but she had not yet learned sufficient inductive logic to draw any moral from the circumstance on the hollowness of social pleasures in general and of balls in particular.

Time sped onward, and Minnie became more and more oblivious of her old life, and more and more at home in her new one. Week followed week, and month followed month, and at last father and mother and Amy had dropped altogether out of her conversation, and almost out of her memory. And if by chance something occurred to bring them and her old home to her remembrance, the once familiar scenes and figures—utterly incongruous as they were with all the analogies of her present life—rose before her so hazy and phantom-like that it was difficult to believe she had ever seen them and lived among them in the waking world.

One day—it was nearly two years since the grand Fanshawe carriage with its powdered attendants had carried her off weeping from the garden-gate whence a gentle face looked smiling after her—she was rudely reminded of the reality of that past which had grown to look so dim and visionary by being told that her mother was dead.

She was old enough now to understand what death meant—old enough to understand that the gracious phantom-like image which at times flitted before her mind's eye had

become a phantom indeed, never by any possibility to be made real again in this world. She knew that the vision of those loving eyes beaming tenderly upon her, of those soft arms opened for her to nestle in them, must continue a vision for ever now; that the dream of the past must remain in the past always, with no hope of being renewed. And, knowing this, her grief was very bitter—bitter enough to make Mrs. Fanshawe, who vainly strove to comfort her, almost jealous of her poor sister's memory.

Mary Haroldson's unspoken presentiment had indeed been fulfilled. Her husband, though broken in spirit and fortune, had long ago grown hale and strong again; but since Minnie's decision had been made known to her, she had gradually pined and faded—ailing with no specific malady, but week by week becoming paler and thinner. At last she fell ill with a low fever which was prevailing in the village, finding its victims chiefly among the old and infirm; and her enfeebled frame sank under it at once. She knew from the first that she was ill beyond hope of recovery, and would have petitioned her sister for leave to see Minnie once more—the privilege would have almost reconciled her to death—only that she feared infection for the child, and so resigned herself to die without that parting look for which she yearned. On her death-bed she prayed God fervently for both her children, but her last breath was spent in blessing the one who had so long been absent from her.

It was a terrible day for John Haroldson, that on which his wife was taken from him. Those who were with him in the first hour of his bereavement, and saw the vacant stunned look on his face, almost feared that his reason must give way under the stroke. But he eluded their vigilance, and got away from them to Captain Pullyn's lodgings,

whither little Amy had been sent to be out of the reach of infection. The captain saw at once what had happened in the blank, stony stare with which he entered, and hastened forward with a few words of inarticulate sympathy.

‘Yes, she is dead,’ said Haroldson in dull mechanical tones, looking at his friend as though he scarcely knew him. ‘Mary is dead.’

He sat down with his arms folded, and his gaze directed drearily into space. At this moment little Amy, who had heard the sound of her father’s footsteps, came toddling towards him out of a back room, intent on asking when she might go back to mother. He caught her by the arm, and drew her somewhat roughly to his knee, looking into her face the while with eyes that shone almost fiercely in their sharp searching scrutiny.

‘I have nobody left but you now. *You* will never go away to let your father die alone, will you?’

Amy lifted up her dark eyes, and fixed them upon him wonderingly. There must have been something in his expression which made her feel that the question was a solemn one, for her look grew very grave, and her voice was strangely earnest, as she answered:

‘No, I never will.’

Her father took her in his arms and strained her with passionate vehemence to his heart. And then, for the first time since his wife’s death, tears came to his relief, and he wept on the child’s neck as though he were a child himself.

As has been said, the blow which carried desolation into her old home fell very heavily upon Minnie also. It was long before she recovered the natural tone of her spirits—long before Mrs. Fanshawe felt secure against being scandalized by an apparently causeless gust of tears and

sobs, afterwards explained by Minnie herself to have reference to poor dear mother whom she was never to see again. But at last time and the constant petting of her aunt assuaged the violence of her sorrow; and gradually it, and almost the remembrance of it, faded away, as was perhaps only natural. For there was no external incident to re-open the wound or retard its healing, the girl from that time forth growing up without hearing a word to remind her of her old home. And the memory of that old home, as a necessary consequence, fled further and further into the past, until at length it was hardly distinguishable in the distance.

Yet, strange to say, at the rare moments when the scenes and associations of her childhood were accidentally recalled to her, they always shone through the mists of time with ineffable brightness and pleasantness. Anything that reminded her, were it only for an instant, of her old life was peculiarly grateful to her. The smell of wild primroses, for instance, would lap her in a momentary elysium, for it brought back a time long ago, when she had gathered primroses with her father and Amy in fields greener and sunnier far than she ever saw fields now. There was a golden halo about the past which was wanting to the present, wanting even to that less distant past which followed the date of her arrival under Mrs. Fanshawe's roof.

The cause of this difference of colour between the old life and the new she had never tried to discover; perhaps she was hardly conscious that any such difference existed. If she had thought about it at all, she would probably have ascribed her feelings to the illusions of childhood, for assuredly it would never have occurred to her that she could really have been happier in that old despised life which she knew

to have been so poor and mean than in the new life which was so comfortable and so altogether as it should be. But whether she was conscious of it or not, a difference of colour did exist between her views of past and present—such a difference as there is between poetry and prose, sunshine and shade; and whether she thought of it or not, a real reason for the difference existed also. And the reason was this, that her affections—that part of us which gives the appreciation of poetry and sunshine—had been nourished then, and were starved now. At home she had loved her father and mother and little sister with the whole force of her nature, whereas there was nobody to love with the whole force of her nature at Mrs. Fanshawe's. It is true that she liked her aunt—her mamma as she called her now—very much, and even believed that she loved her as a daughter should love a mother. But in this belief she was mistaken, for Mrs. Fanshawe, being a woman incapable of feeling any very profound affection herself, was also incapable of inspiring it in others.

And therefore it was that among all Mrs. Fanshawe's gay parterres and carefully tended conservatories there was no flower half so sweet to Minnie as wild primroses.

RAYMOND'S HEROINE.

Part II.

M I N N A.

CHAPTER I.

RESTITUTION.

THE scene was again the little garden before Black Moor Farm, and the season was again spring.

Fifteen years had passed since the sunny spring evening that Mrs. Haroldson, with Amy at her side, had watched her husband and little daughter returning to her across the moor. But the time was morning now, the woodlands that formed so pleasant a back-ground to the farm-house and neighbouring village being bright with the shimmering of young green leaves, and harmonious with the warbling of many-voiced birds. And instead of the graceful woman and joyous child that had stood at the gate that evening, there was only in the garden now a gray-haired man working among the flowers. The gray-haired man was John Haroldson—his person still showing traces of the old burly strength and vigour, though with a furrowed face and stooping figure

that made him look not fifteen but thirty years older than of yore.

The alteration in him contrasted strangely with the almost unchanged aspect of his surroundings. The inanimate objects about him looked nearly the same as they had done formerly—the moor as bleak and barren, the farm-house as cosy and substantial, the garden as trim and nicely kept, the village with its green setting of foliage as picturesque. Altogether a local Rip Van Winkle who had fallen asleep fifteen years before would, on awakening now, have found wonderfully few changes to perplex him. For Hollsworth was a slow little place, not apt to march with the times, and even the railway which now connected it with St. Austin's had as yet failed to inspire it with the go-ahead spirit of its contemporaries.

While John Haroldson was occupying himself with his flowers, a figure which he might have observed had he been less intent on his task was advancing towards him along the road which led from the village to the farm-house. He was too busy to notice it, but if he had, he might have known it even in the distance for that of a stranger; for the inhabitants of Hollsworth and its environs had lived long enough among each other to detect a non-resident at once, were it by nothing else than gait and bearing. And the person now approaching the farm had something in both gait and bearing very sufficiently distinguishing him from any of the dapper village shop-keepers or uncouth countrymen who were the most frequent passers-by in that neighbourhood.

Not that there was anything about him that could properly be said to be peculiar, his appearance being simply that of a well-dressed, well-made man, with a powerfully framed figure a little over the middle height, and a grave

dark-complexioned face. This was shaded by hair of a rich deep brown, scarcely distinguishable from black; and the eyes—the only feature of the countenance that on a nearer inspection could be called remarkable—were dark, penetrating, and singularly lustrous. The stranger was in reality about three or four-and-thirty years of age, but from the staid, almost stern, expression habitual with him might easily have been taken for half-a-dozen years older.

As he came from Hollsworth towards the farm, he seemed to be in deep meditation, walking along with an absorbed absent air which made him look reserved and perhaps a little churlish. At least so thought a group of pretty country lasses who met him on the road, but whom, in spite of the inquisitive looks of laughter-loving eyes and the whispering of silvery voices, he passed with no more attention than if they had been a flock of sheep going to market. On the other hand, he was not too much engrossed to notice the trouble of a little dot of a child that was trying to scale a stile into a field where some elder companions were at play, and lifted it over with a smile that made the grave face look quite other than it had been a moment before.

He walked thoughtfully on till he came to the gate of the farm-house garden. Here he stopped, and looked about him a little uncertainly until his eyes fell on the figure of John Haroldson stooping among his flowers.

‘This is Black Moor Farm?’ the wayfarer asked with a slight inclination of the head. ‘I wish to speak for a few minutes with Mr. Haroldson.’

The farmer rose and held open the gate, eyeing his visitor curiously the while.

‘My name is Haroldson, sir. Step inside, if you please.’

There is nobody there, for Amy—that's my daughter—has just gone out to do her marketing.'

He led the way into the kitchen—comfortable and well-ordered as of old—and set a chair for the new-comer, still evidently at a loss as to what business could have brought him. The latter noticed the questioning look, and said in answer:

'You will not wonder what I have come for, Mr. Haroldson, when you hear who I am. My name is Lee—Raymond Lee. I suppose you have received the letters I have written to you lately?'

The farmer did not reply. He had turned very pale, and fell heavily into a chair as if unable to support himself. The visitor did not remark his agitation, and went on:

'I have written several times, as you know, and, not having had any answer, have made it my business to call at Hollsworth this morning and discover what had become of you; I was afraid you might have moved from the neighbourhood. You see I am impatient, Mr. Haroldson, but I cannot help it. I shall not be happy until I have made you such restitution as lies in my power.'

'I want no restitution,' said the farmer hurriedly, and he spoke with lowered eyes as though not choosing to confront those of his interlocutor. 'There, there, that will do; let us forget all about it. Forgive and forget, that's the best way.'

Raymond Lee shook his head with a faint smile—a very bitter one it was.

'It is easy for you who have done no wrong to forget, but not so easy for the—the wrong-doers, or those who represent them. My father'—a flush started to his brow as the word passed his lips—'my father did a great injury to you

and others who trusted him, and I have the right to repair as much of it as I can. I am not able to make up to you and them what he lost for you by mismanagement, any more than I can compensate any of you for what he may have caused you to suffer; but I can at least—and I will—restore the sum of which he actually robbed you.'

His lips closed sternly over the words, and, drawing forth his pocket-book, he took out a little bundle of notes, and pushed it towards the farmer.

'Mr. Haroldson, there is your share of the sum lost to the Company by my father's frauds. You will find it makes six hundred pounds. I should have sent it to you weeks ago if you had answered my letters.'

'No, no,' exclaimed the other in a shaking voice, pushing the notes back again; 'I don't want your money, and I won't have it. I never complained about it, did I? and I don't see why you can't leave me alone as I have left you.'

Mr. Lee looked surprised, but answered calmly:

'Simply because my father stole money which I have set my heart for years on paying back to the uttermost farthing. And I have paid it back now,' he added with a short breath of relief—'yours was the only unsatisfied claim left.'

'Claim! What do you mean? I never made a claim on you in my life—you know I never did. Take your money back; I will have nothing to do with it.'

'But you must have to do with it,' said the visitor, and his voice was very severe in its emphasis. 'The money is yours, and if by its repayment I seek to wipe a stain off the name I am unfortunate enough to bear, you have no right to hinder me. I think I may ask you what *you* mean, Mr. Haroldson. Others have not refused to receive their money back, and why should you?'

‘Because—because . . . I have no particular reason of course,’ answered the farmer, stammering in some confusion. ‘But I am able to do without it, and don’t want to hear of it again. You are in business, it will be useful to you. So—so—take it back—we’re quits.’

The blood rushed into Raymond Lee’s dark face.

‘You are very unjust, Mr. Haroldson. You despise me and affront me for a crime which I have never committed, and which I am doing my best to expiate.’

‘No, no, it is not that—upon my word, it is not that. I respect you, I think you have behaved splendidly, but’ . . .

‘There is your money, Mr. Haroldson. I am glad to hear you have so good an opinion of me.’

The farmer was about to answer, but just as he had taken up the notes to force them back upon the donor, Mr. Lee’s tall figure had passed him, and was striding across the threshold. With an inarticulate exclamation of surprise, he rose to follow, and hurried down to the garden-gate, but too late—the visitor had departed and would not be recalled.

John Haroldson returned to the house with a brow more clouded than it had been for years. It was as though he had felt a new burden laid upon him, or an old one re-imposed. He flung the little packet of notes on the table with an impatient movement of the hand, as though shaking himself free of an object of disgust. Then, with a heavy sigh, he threw himself into a chair by the fireside, and sat morosely watching the smoke as it curled up the chimney. The visit he had received that morning must have recalled old associations strangely, for, as he sat, his thoughts were manifestly busy with the far-off past.

He had remained thus upwards of half-an-hour wrapped in dismal reverie, when a familiar step crunching on the

gravel walk made him look round. An old man, who waved his stick cheerily as he caught Haroldson's eye, had opened the gate, and was coming up the little garden towards the house. It was Captain Pullyn, showing the marks of time in the creases of his rosy apple cheeks and the whiteness of his large frill-like whiskers, but hale and hearty, and looking as if there were plenty of life in him yet. He had taken his final leave of sea-faring now, and had been settled for some time in his former quarters at Hollsworth, feeling more at home near his old friend than anywhere else.

‘Well, Jack, I have come to take a look at you you see. So you have got your money at last, hey?’

‘How do you know that?’ said Haroldson, and turned moodily towards the fire again.

‘How do I know?—how do you think? Why, I had a visit from young Lee myself this morning—came to inquire if you had changed your latitude or walked the plank, or what else had happened to you, that you had never taken any notice of his letters. I suppose he thought I was a good person to come to, as he knew I wasn't shy about answering questions. When he wrote to me six weeks ago to ask what bank I should like four hundred pounds paid into, I told him at once. No nonsense about me, I flatter myself. So he wouldn't let you hang off any longer, I suppose?’

‘There is the money—he left it behind him,’ said Haroldson, sullenly. ‘But I told him I didn't want it, and I don't.’

‘Bosh!’ commented the captain, ‘you'll find plenty to do with it, I warrant. Well, what did you think of him—a fine young fellow, isn't he?’

‘I don't know really—I did not notice.’

‘Didn't you? More's the pity then, that's all. But I can tell you, Jack, he's a splendid chap—so clever and long-

headed, and not a grain of pride in him for all he's such a big man in the world. What do you think, now, of him remembering little Joe, and wanting to see him again?'

'Oh indeed!'

'Yes indeed,' rejoined the captain, rubbing his hands gleefully. 'As he was sheering off, I took the opportunity, which personally I never had afore, of thanking him for what he did once for my boy Joe, when he boarded the two big 'uns that were for running him down at school. He didn't know what I meant at first, but I brought it to his mind presently, and he laughed, and said, "Was that your Joe?" says he, "I remember him, and a fine little lad he was" (which he was and no mistake), "and what is he a doing of now?" he says. So I told him he was with Brown Brothers at St. Austin's, and giving great satisfaction, and he seemed quite pleased to think of the little fellow he knew at school being in the same town with him; and, says he, "you must give me his address, captain, I should like to see him sometimes." Which I did of course, and my opinion is that he'll be a friend to Joe for life. What do you think of that, hey?'

'I'm sure I can't say. I don't want to hear anything more about him.'

'Come, come, mate, that ain't fair, 'pon my word it ain't. Bygones are bygones, and you mustn't be always fishing 'em up again. This young fellow never did you an ounce of harm in his life, and as for the father, you can afford to let him bide where he is, which is under ground most like by this time.'

The farmer bent down to push further into the grate a cinder which seemed on the point of falling, but managed so awkwardly that three or four others came rattling out instead.

‘Why, what makes you think that?’ he asked, with a short laugh at his own clumsiness.

‘Well, it looks like it, don’t it, seeing that he has never been sighted since the day he cut his moorings fifteen year ago. Not but what he’d do his best to keep himself close, and, being such a deep ’un as he was, there’s no saying that he mightn’t succeed. But anyhow he’ll never trouble you again, you know.

Haroldson gave another of his short laughs.

‘No, I should think not. Ha! ha! what an idea!’

‘And therefore I say it’s a confounded shame you should bear so hard on a fine young fellow like that, for no fault in the world but for being his father’s son. An honourable open-handed chap, that no sooner comes into property but he rakes up people he never heard of, and pays ’em money they no more expected to see again than’ — the captain paused for a moment to find a suitable figure — ‘than if it had been hid at the bottom of the Devil’s Coal-cellar,’ he added, triumphantly.

Surely the farmer was very clumsy to-day, for at this moment the poker, which he had been mechanically balancing between his finger and thumb, clattered noisily down on the hearth.

‘You are driving me stupid with your chatter,’ he muttered angrily, after a few seconds’ pause.

‘So I see,’ said the captain, with imperturbable good humour. ‘Come, Jack, don’t lose your temper, whatever you do. I should have thought it would have been all fair weather and fair winds with you this morning, after getting such a heap of money.’

‘Money, money — what do you mean by always talking to me about money? What did I want with his money? He

comes with his bits of tissue-paper, and thinks he has made all clear on his side of the account, does he? But he hasn't, confound him — no indeed he hasn't. I've lost a wife and a child through his father's means — can he give me back them, I wonder? Not that I want the girl again, though — Lord forbid — a cold, hollow-hearted' . . .

'There you go again, there you go again — it's the poor little un's turn now. I declare, Jack, I don't think you've got any reasonableness left.'

'Then God forgive them that knocked it out of me. And they want to make amends with money, do they? money! It is all right now, they think — their side stands quite clear. But I can tell them the balance is against them yet.'

And as he spoke, he absolutely trembled with excitement.

'Yes, yes, who says it isn't?' answered the captain, soothingly. 'He never thought to make it all up to you, Jack, how could he? But six hundred pound is six hundred pound, and that's better than nothing, anyhow.'

'Better than nothing, is it? It's the same as nothing to me — I won't touch a penny of it.'

'Fol de rol de lol. Try some one else with that story, Jack. It would be a good job for you and me too if we could afford to chuck six hundred pound overboard without touching a penny of it.'

'I can afford to pay my way without help from *him*,' returned Haroldson, surlily. 'If I've got a roof over my head and keep out of debt, it's enough for me, and thank God I can manage that without his money or anybody else's.'

The vaunt was not unfounded, for John Haroldson, though still poor, was no longer in difficulties. By a long course of industry and frugality he had even managed to repay the sum advanced by Mrs. Fanshawe, which that lady,

looking on it as Minnie's purchase-money, would willingly have let him retain. But he regarded it in the same light himself, and for that very reason obstinately insisted on rendering it back to the last sixpence. He had parted with his child — or rather, as he put it to himself, she had parted with him — but sold her he had not.

And now, to the discomfiture of the captain, he seemed disposed to be equally, and less intelligibly, obstinate in his rejection of the money proffered by the representative of the man who had robbed him.

'I don't want it, and I won't have it,' he summed up passionately. 'I'd throw it into the fire sooner than be a farthing the richer for it.'

He spoke so vehemently that his friend was a little apprehensive of seeing him put the threat into execution.

'It's a sin to talk of throwing good Bank of England notes into the fire while there are poor folks in the world to give 'em to,' expostulated the captain gravely. 'But you don't mean it, Jack; if I thought you did, I'd take out a writ of what-you-may-call-him quirendo against you. Look, here comes Miss Amy — I wonder what she'd say if she heard you go on so.'

Just then a tripping foot-step sounded lightly on the gravel walk. The farmer made a sudden swoop upon the notes, and thrust them hastily into his pocket.

'Not a word to her, mind. She is not to know anything about it.'

Captain Pullyn wondered at his friend's unwonted secretiveness, but did not pursue the subject further. The reviled money had been taken up and pocketed, and there, as it seemed to him, was an end of the matter. Jack Haroldson wasn't so big a fool as you might think to hear him talk.

But whether Jack Haroldson was a fool or not, three advertisements were inserted that week in the second column of *The Times* by as many of the great London hospitals, acknowledging the receipt of a sum of £200 each which had been forwarded by an anonymous benefactor.

CHAPTER II.

RAYMOND LEE.

WHILE his visit was thus discussed in John Haroldson's kitchen, Raymond Lee was making his way back to St. Austin's and his own house, which he entered while it was still early in the afternoon. It was not often that he was to be found at home during the daytime, his waking hours being mostly passed at the large gun-factory which was his place of business, and of which, after years spent there, first as clerk and then as manager, he was now sole proprietor and master. But to-day he was too much absorbed in his own thoughts to be in the mood for business, and went straight home, with hardly a glance at the gates of his work-yard as he passed them on his way.

It was not a particularly pleasant or inviting home, this of Raymond Lee's.

That which he designated home was in fact nothing but a square formal-looking mansion, standing in a desolate garden where the few flowers that were planted obstinately refused to blossom, and approached by a narrow road running between dead walls, beyond which were wood-yards and tan-yards and dock-yards and work-shops and tall chimneys, with all the other ills that the unfashionable and low-lying suburb of a busy sea port is heir to. The house

itself was good enough in its way; but, as the chief object in building it had been that it might be near the gun-factory, so, now that it was built, this was the chief recommendation it possessed. And the square formal-looking mansion, with the furniture and elderly house-keeper therein, constituted all that Raymond Lee called home, for of loving smiles or welcoming voices to greet him on his return to it there were none. But he had lived here for years, and, though it was not the abode that he might have chosen for himself, he did not think of changing it since circumstances had chosen it for him.

The master of the house did not live in the principal part of it, all the best apartments being shrouded by the house-keeper in brown holland and perpetual seclusion. A couple of rooms were reserved for his occupation at the back, a bed-room and small parlour. The latter was fitted up as library and study, the walls being lined with books, and the table covered with papers and writing materials. Two objects only there were in the room not adapted for studious uses—one of them a little work-table standing by the window, and the other a small oil portrait for which space had been left between the book-shelves, the portrait of a gentle sorrowful broken-down-looking woman, with worn features that showed traces of having once been beautiful.

It was the likeness of Raymond Lee's mother, and the work-table had been hers also.

It was towards this portrait that Raymond's eyes turned first as he entered his room to-day on his return from Hollsworth. The repayment to their rightful owners of the moneys stolen by her husband had been the most cherished desire of Mrs. Lee's heart; and, knowing how her poor faded features would have lighted up and thanked him had she

been alive to hear from his lips that the task of restitution had that day been completed, he instinctively looked towards the imaged face which was all of her left to him. But no smile of loving approbation was there—only the patient expression of silent suffering which was never to be changed now—and he felt that he was alone in the world, alone with none to rejoice with him in his successes, or to sympathize with him in possible troubles. And, grave and self-possessed though he was, the feeling was very oppressive to him.

For he had not been intended by nature to go through life without a friend. What there was of gloom and sternness about him had not been always there, though circumstances had so ingrained it that it now seemed a part of himself.

Just at the age which perhaps does more than any other to form a young man's character—between eighteen and nineteen—the great blow of his life had fallen, driving him back upon himself at the time when a healthy nature is most sanguine and expansive, most confident of its own resources, most hungry for external sympathy. He had gone to Oxford full of high hopes and high spirits, indulging in splendid visions of scholarly success and reputation—for his tastes and ambition both pointed in that direction, and the family means were sufficient to secure to his abilities a fair field—when the fatal news came announcing the ruin of his prospects, and fixing the guilt of fraud and embezzlement on his father's name. From that day forth Raymond Lee was a changed character. The high hopes and high spirits were all gone—swept away in a revulsion of feeling too strong for them to stem—and instead of the candid, open-hearted, ambitious youth, there was a grave, reserved, austere man. His whole nature was soured by bitter disappointment and a yet more bitter sense of shame—or

rather it would have been soured save for the love he bore his mother, a love which the consciousness of being her only stay and comforter rendered yet more tender and abundant. But towards all others whom he had known he had grown cold and reticent, perhaps even a little hard and cynical. His native pride made him sensitive, and it seemed to him that they all despised him for his father's misdeeds—probably some of them did—and therefore he held aloof from them, retreating, except for his mother, altogether within himself. Of his father he thought as little as he could, but, when he did, it was with peculiar bitterness. How else could he think of the man who, never remembered as a kind or loving parent, had ended by breaking his mother's heart?

Thus had Raymond Lee, from a frank high-spirited young man, become, if not exactly a misanthrope, very far indeed from a lover of his kind.

He had strict ideas of justice and duty—his loathing of his father's crime had made them almost morbid in their severity—but, while scrupulously rendering all men their legal due, he was often uncharitable and even unjust in his views of character and estimation of motives. He did not give the world proper credit for the good that was in it, and inclined to exaggerate its faults, its aptitude for cheating and betraying, its proneness to worship the exalted and forget the fallen. Had not his own father been a cheat and betrayer, and had not he himself suffered from the neglect that waits on sunken fortunes? As a matter of duty and moral obligation, he would have refused no man a service that reasonably lay within his power to confer, but he would have taken absolutely no pleasure in the act—unless indeed the person to be benefited belonged to a comparatively poor

or helpless class, and then he would have performed it *con amore*. For it was his wont to think less harshly and judge less strictly of those below himself than of those who were his social equals; it was his social equals only who had possessed the power of wounding him by averted faces and altered looks.

Since the blasting of his youthful hopes, the circumstances of his life had been such as tended to confirm rather than undo the change which at that time had suddenly produced itself in his character. He and his mother had been left in complete destitution, and it was necessary for him to renounce all the prospects on which he had set his heart, to abandon the studies in which he took a passionate interest, and find some immediate means of supporting her and himself. An uncle, Mrs. Lee's brother, who was the proprietor of a large gun-factory at St. Austin's, came forward at this juncture with an offer to receive Raymond into his establishment as a clerk, and to find room for mother and son in his own house. The proposal was eagerly accepted, and Raymond accommodated himself as best he could to the dull laborious clerk's life which at that time seemed the only one he had to look forward to, the factory and its handsome profits being destined for his uncle's son, then a mere boy and several years younger than himself. The business had little interest for one whose tastes were all studious, and his uncle was not the kind of man to make those happy on whom he felt that he was conferring a favour; but Raymond worked on steadily and uncomplainingly, with no other solace than an hour or two of the evening spent alone with his mother in the little back parlour which was considered specially theirs.

At last, after years of patient plodding, a prospect of new

fortune was opened to him by the death of his cousin at a foreign university where he had been finishing his education—an event which left Raymond his uncle's only near relative, with the exception of Mrs. Lee herself. But the old man, though now intending to leave the business to his nephew, would not part with any of his own power by admitting him to a present share in the profits, and the only advantage immediately accruing to Raymond was promotion to the post of manager at a lower salary than that for which anybody else could have been induced to perform its duties. So that, even as his uncle's acknowledged heir, he was still under tutelage and control; and, with large wealth in prospect, had to chafe under the impossibility of doing anything to fulfil the darling ambition of his mother and himself—the repayment of the sum of which his father had robbed the defunct Company.

It was a Quixotic idea enough, this which mother and son nursed in the solitude of their little back parlour, but people who lead a life cut off from the rest of the world are apt to be unpractical in some of their notions. Be it what it might, they had both got the idea into their heads; and, although the feelings which had suggested it to the one were widely different from those with which it was adopted by the other, both cherished the hope of its realization with equal earnestness. Poor Mrs. Lee had a vague fancy that by an act of vicarious expiation it might be possible to lessen the guilt of the husband for whom she still felt a lingering tenderness; but with Raymond the desire to repair the wrongs suffered by his father's victims was an impatient protest against the heinousness of his father's crime, an impulse of indignation and disgust prompting him at any cost to thrust the stigma of reflected dishonour from his own and his

mother's name. In the first days of their adversity, while he was still a youth, he had taken his resolution; and, his nature being a constant one, he had kept it steadily in view through all vicissitudes, never, even when his fortunes were at their darkest, despairing of its fulfilment.

That fulfilment the poor mother was not destined to witness. She had died a year or two before her brother, while Raymond's wealth was still only in prospect. By her death all the pleasure he might ever have had in anticipating his independence was utterly annihilated - he was left a lonely man, without a sympathizing friend, or even a congenial acquaintance. Since their misfortunes, he and his mother had lived together almost as hermits, shunning all society except their own, as though they had held themselves plague-smitten. So, indeed Raymond had at first, perhaps not altogether without reason, believed that he and his would be regarded by the world, and had therefore shrunk with morbid susceptibility from confronting it. By the time that it was ready to receive him into favour as the future proprietor of one of the largest establishments of St. Austin's, he had contracted that habit of seclusion which is the most difficult of all others to shake off, steadily declining all overtures—and they were not a few—which were made to tempt him out of his retirement. Thus when his mother died, he was left absolutely alone, unloved and unloving; and, in spite of the brilliant prospects which others envied him, he felt that only one object remained to him worth living for.

The opportunity of accomplishing that object arrived at last. Three or four months before the day of his visit to John Haroldson, Raymond's uncle had died, leaving him sole heir to the business and the wealth amassed by it; and

his first act after entering into possession had been to set apart from his capital the sum of twenty-five thousand pounds, which, as he had found by careful study of the Company's books, represented the total amount of his father's defalcations. This money he had distributed in due proportion among the shareholders or their representatives, John Haroldson being the last to receive his portion in consequence of his own strange remissness in neglecting to answer the notices repeatedly served upon him.

And now Raymond was able to erase the last item from the long list of claims which accurately and laboriously he had made out against himself. He had brought to final fulfilment that day the object which he had been proposing to himself for years, and he was satisfied, as how indeed could he be otherwise? But in his satisfaction he was strangely sad and heavy-hearted. He thought of her who would have shared it with him once, and as he entered with his achieved purpose into the little parlour where she no longer sat to welcome him, it seemed to him that it had never been so desolate. The very consciousness of having attained the end so long striven for increased his sense of depression. Hitherto, however dull and solitary had been his existence since the death of her in whom all his affections had been bound up, he had at least had something to live for, something to hope and wait for. But now by his very triumph his object was gone from him, and life stretched before him a dreary barren waste. The spring sunshine was smiling on the world without; in the fields and woods, even in his own unfertile garden, all nature, animate and inanimate, seemed to be vibrating with the hopes and joys of a new awakening; only for him, Raymond Lee, were the pleasures of life exhausted. Exhausted already, and he had scarcely tasted of them.

He was in general sufficiently equable of mood, but he could not help being painfully affected by the sense of utter loneliness and hopelessness which pressed on him to-day; and, as he sat dreamily gazing at the portrait which was the only substitute he had for human companionship, the gravity of his expression deepened into gloom.

So absorbed was he with sad and bitter meditation that he paid no heed to a hasty footstep that suddenly made itself heard outside his door, and even an impatient tap on the panels failed to rouse him. The tap was repeated, but with the same result, and then the door was flung open, and his housekeeper entered the room breathless and panting.

The noise she made in opening the door caught his ear at last and without turning his head he asked almost mechanically:

‘What is it?’

‘Oh sir! such a dreadful thing! An accident at the factory—something blowed up in the casting, I think they say it was—and one of the men hurt shockingly. And please, sir, you’re wanted directly.’

Raymond Lee sprang to his feet—he was transformed into the man of action at once.

‘Have they sent for a doctor?’ was the only question which he paused to put.

The housekeeper answered in the affirmative, and without interrogating her further he hurried forth to the scene of the disaster.

CHAPTER III.

FIRST SIGHT.

A FEW minutes brought him to the gates of the factory. He entered hastily, and hurried across the open space round which the workshops were built — dimly conscious of hearing a querulous female voice say something about a carriage, and of seeing a quantity of ribbons and laces fluttering in a corner of the yard, but too intent on learning the state of the injured workman to feel any curiosity as to the cause of so unwonted an apparition, or even to take a second look at it.

On reaching the shed where the accident had happened, he was relieved by finding that it was by no means so serious as he had feared. The sufferer, who was on the point of being carried to the hospital, had received a few superficial burns which caused great pain, but were not extensive enough to be dangerous; and a doctor already on the spot was able to hold out hopes that with proper treatment the patient might probably in a few weeks be at work again. The master gave what instructions he could to insure the poor fellow's comfort, and saw him started on his way to the hospital, remaining behind a few minutes himself to examine the scene of the accident and to inquire into its causes.

By this time Raymond had forgotten all about the ribbons and laces, and was a good deal surprised on coming out into the yard again to find them still fluttering in the corner where he had first caught a glimpse of them. They belonged, as he now had leisure to observe, to two ladies, one of whom,

a good-looking portly matron, somewhere between fifty and sixty years of age, rested herself a little superciliously on a seat improvised out of a couple of logs of timber, holding a scent-bottle to her nose, and carrying on a low-voiced conversation with her companion. The latter was standing up close by, with her face turned towards the first lady, so that for Raymond the features were concealed; but her figure was slender and well turned, and the tightly gloved hand which carelessly swung a tiny lace-covered parasol had all the daintiness of youth and good-breeding.

‘Them ladies were by when it happened, sir,’ explained a workman in answer to Raymond’s inquiring glance. ‘They came with an order to go over the works, and had just gone in to have a look at the casting. And weren’t they frightened neither? Lord bless us, I thought the old ‘un would ha’ gone into fits.’

Raymond, who, to oblige a customer or business acquaintance, would occasionally sign an order for admitting to a view of his establishment a party of sight-seers of whom he might personally know nothing, had no idea who or what these visitors were, except indeed that they were total strangers to him. However, he felt bound to show some concern for ladies who on his premises had just been subjected to fright and even to considerable danger, and, going up to the elder, he said:

‘I am sorry to hear you have been so much alarmed. You are neither of you hurt, I hope?’

‘Not in one sense,’ returned the lady languidly, removing the scent-bottle for an instant from her face. ‘But in another dreadfully — indeed I don’t know if ever I shall get over it. It has been altogether something so frightful! When I saw

that great sheet of flame rushing towards us I no more expected to come out of the place alive' . . .

She paused, overcome by the reminiscence, and again had recourse to her vinaigrette. Raymond thought of the luckless workman who had come off so much worse than this elegant lady visitor, and remained unsympathetically silent.

'Yes, what with one thing and another, I am quite upset. I was beginning to revive a little two or three minutes ago, and would you believe it, they came and carried that poor creature past on a shutter — just a few yards from where I was sitting. Such a horrible sight — it made me quite ill again. I really think they might have had the feeling to go round by another way. Can you tell me anything about my carriage?'

Raymond answered dryly that he could not, and was about to turn on his heel, quite disgusted with what he inwardly called the heartlessness of these dressed-out women of the world, when he was arrested by a soft voice, asking:

'And the poor man — what does the doctor say about him?'

The other lady was now the questioner, and as she spoke she turned her face for the first time towards Raymond. It was girlish and fair-complexioned, with deep blue eyes, delicately tinted cheeks, and a white forehead, over which there rippled a shining mass of wavy golden hair. A beautiful face it was — bright and sunny in its fresh clear loveliness; and so it appeared even now that it was shaded by an expression of sweet compassionate solicitude which made the deep blue eyes look more than usually earnest.

Raymond was taken altogether by surprise — he had expected neither the voice nor the face. A sense of momentary bewilderment came over him, such as one feels

when dazzled by a burst of unlooked-for light, and he was conscious that he made an awkward pause before replying:

‘The doctor’s opinion is very favourable indeed. There will be a great deal of pain of course, but no real danger, he thinks.’

‘I am so glad,’ said the young lady gently. ‘Poor man! to think of his going through so much in the meantime! Mamma, is it not dreadful?’

‘Very dreadful,’ said the matron. ‘My dear, mark my words — I shall suffer for this with one of my bad nervous headaches.’

‘I hope they will be very kind to him, poor fellow. Mamma, I wonder if’ . . .

The sentence was finished in a whisper into the elder lady’s ear.

‘I shouldn’t think there was any occasion, my dear — he is sure to be taken care of without that. Besides, I shall want my change to buy some eau de cologne as we pass — it is the only thing that does my head good.’

‘I have some money, mamma,’ said the young lady quickly, and her purse was already in her hand. ‘I should be very glad to give a trifle if you think it would contribute in any way to his comfort,’ she continued, looking at Raymond.

He had been busy wondering how such a daughter should have come of such a mother, and absolutely started when he found the fair face turned towards him for an answer.

‘No, no, all that is the duty of the employer,’ he replied a little confusedly. ‘And you may be sure it will not be neglected.’

Indeed it would not, for, as he spoke, he felt that his promise to the young lady constituted an obligation hardly less binding than his duty to the poor workman.

‘There, my dear, I told you so,’ said the mamma. ‘But you are always so impetuous — it is just like you. And you really have heard nothing about my carriage?’ she went on, addressing Raymond.

‘I really have not,’ he answered with some coldness. He paused; then, after a glance at the young lady, resumed more politely: ‘I am sorry you should be put to inconvenience. Can I make any inquiries for you?’

‘Oh no! thank you — we have a gentleman who has gone to manage for us. You see we sent the carriage away for two hours, being told it took that time to go over the works, but of course after what has happened I am fit for nothing except to get home as soon as possible. The man is driving up and down somewhere near, I am sure, and the gentleman is gone to find him, but is looking in the wrong place, I suppose, as usual. I never knew such a bad one as your papa is to look for anything, did you, my love? And it is so cold and miserable, waiting in this horrid place by ourselves.’

During the greater part of this speech Raymond had hardly been conscious that he was addressed, his eyes having again involuntarily wandered towards the young lady. He recalled his attention with an effort, just in time to catch the last words, and then it suddenly occurred to him that this open yard was not the place for softly bred ladies to be kept waiting in.

‘It is not right for you to be standing here,’ he said eagerly. ‘Will you not come into the office and sit down?’

The invitation was addressed to the elder lady, but it was the young one only who was standing.

‘Thank you,’ was the answer, ‘I think we will. Come, Minna, there is no knowing how much longer your papa may keep us waiting.’

Raymond led the way across the court to the dingy one-storied brick building which contained the counting-house and private offices. Passing through the former, where a couple of clerks were sitting at work, he went up to a door which communicated with an inner room.

‘Oh dear! shan’t we be intruding?’ said the elder lady, pausing with a simper as she caught sight of the inscription on the brass name-plate. ‘It is Mr. Lee’s own room, I see, and I know he does not like company.’

‘He will not object,’ said Raymond briefly. He saw that she took him for one of his own subordinates, and was a little vexed as he thought that her companion probably shared the error, but was too proud, and perhaps also too awkward, to correct it.

‘What a dark dismal little room!’ remarked the lady of the vinaigrette as she sank exhausted on the first chair which presented itself.

Raymond looked round. Yes, the room was dark certainly; the window was small, and there were buildings outside which partially intercepted the light. He had often enough thought it dark himself, and remembered the time when it had chafed him sorely to be condemned day after day to sit at work in it. And yet it did not look exactly dark just now.

‘It is a funny little place, to be sure,’ said the young lady, taking a rapid survey with her bright blue eyes. ‘Dreadfully grim and business-like, is it not? And oh! mamma, what a woful look-out! That great oppressive dead wall—I wonder if it leaves a morsel of blue sky visible.’

She steered her way round the high desk to the window, her silks and ribbons rustling against the heavy office furni-

ture like the plumage of a beautiful bird against the bars of a cage too small for it.

‘Only the least little scrap,’ she pronounced, as she looked up dolefully. ‘How can any one endure it, I wonder?’

Raymond Lee stood by and watched the while.

It was a strange sensation for him to see this bright fair-haired girl peering and prying about his room, with which she looked almost as much out of keeping as a butterfly which might have perversely strayed into its musty fastnesses from far-away flower pastures. The gloomy chamber which was so drearily familiar to him seemed to change its aspect altogether as she fluttered round it—so entirely that, though he recognised every separate piece of furniture and other such detail, he felt as though the place were altogether new and fresh to him, and could not help wondering a little sadly whether with her departure it would again become dull and prosaic as formerly. Once and once only the dark office-parlour had looked pleasant to him before, when his mother had come to pay him a visit there, and made it seem friendly and home-like by the mere fact of her presence; but in the natural course of things the charm had long ago been rubbed off again by hours of solitary uncheered toil. Still the apparition of to-day was so very bright and unreal-looking that it was difficult, while it lasted, to believe in the natural course of things. When one sees a sunbeam dancing on a landscape hitherto known only in cloudy weather, the change is so great that one can hardly imagine the scene given back to sunlessness.

‘I hope you feel better now, mamma,’ said the young lady, bringing her peregrinations to a close by settling herself on an antiquated horse-hair arm-chair near the window. As she dropped into it, Raymond remembered that it was the same

on which his mother had sat the day he had entertained her here, and without knowing why, felt pleased that the young lady had chosen it.

‘A little better now,’ was the languishing response. ‘But I don’t know what I should have done if I had not been accommodated with a seat in-doors.’

‘We have been very fortunate,’ said the young lady, and she smiled softly towards Raymond, as though thanking him.

How wonderfully bright and beaming that smile was! It had been so entirely unexpected that he was a little confused, but managed to stammer forth in answer:

‘I am very glad to have been of service to you.’

In saying this, however, he stupidly looked at the younger lady instead of the elder, and consequently received a reply from neither.

For some moments there was a pause, which did not appear to embarrass the two ladies, but which Raymond felt to be very awkward. Quite unconscious that they were receiving his hospitalities, they evidently did not consider themselves under any obligation to enter into conversation with him, while for his part he was too little a man of the world to know how to make a beginning without assistance. It would have been easy for him of course to go away and leave them to themselves, as was probably expected of him, but somehow he did not care for going away just then.

He was presently helped out of his dilemma in a way he had not expected. One of the clerks who had been writing in the outer room put in his head to announce:

‘Oh! if you please, sir, here’s a gentleman come to say that the carriage is waiting.’

And through the half-open door Raymond saw a tall, bald-

headed, grey-whiskered gentleman, with whom he had occasionally had dealings in the way of business, and who, as he now remembered, had asked the other day for an order to admit himself and two ladies to view the factory.

‘How do you do, Mr. Fanshawe?’ said Raymond, more cordially than he had ever greeted that gentleman before. ‘Step this way, please, the ladies are resting in my room for a few minutes.’

‘Ah! Mr. Lee, is it you? How do?’ And with two fingers extended, being the warmest salutation he was ever known to bestow on any one, Mr. Fanshawe entered the room where Raymond had accommodated his visitors.

‘Mr. Lee!’ exclaimed the elder lady, and she turned towards Raymond with a look of unfeigned surprise. ‘So it has actually been Mr. Lee himself whom we have had the pleasure of speaking to all this time! I had no idea—had you, Minna? Henry, my dear, pray make Mr. Lee acquainted with us.’

‘It is my wife, you know,’ said Mr. Fanshawe, looking very much embarrassed by the task laid on him. ‘Mr. Lee—Mrs. and Miss Fanshawe.’

And, having thus gracefully acquitted himself, he eagerly subsided into his native obscurity.

‘We have to thank you so very much for your kindness,’ went on Mrs. Fanshawe to Raymond in her most friendly tones. ‘I don’t know what would have become of us without you—really I don’t.’

Raymond bowed gravely—his natural staidness of demeanour rarely allowed him to appear other than quiet and composed.

‘You have nothing to thank me for—I am only sorry to have been able to do so little.’

‘Nothing to thank you for!’ cried Mrs. Fanshawe, holding up her finger in playful remonstrance. ‘As if I did not know what a privilege it is to be admitted into your own private room! And we were sadly in the way, I fear—ladies always are. Did you not find us so, Mr. Lee? Now speak the truth.’

‘Indeed not—I assure you,’ said Raymond, in a tone of more earnestness than seemed necessary; but he was looking at the younger lady as he spoke, and felt strangely anxious to rebut the imputation.

‘Well, it is very kind of you to say so. And to think we never so much as thanked you—it must have seemed terribly rude. But it is your own fault, you know; you never give your neighbours an opportunity of making your acquaintance, and cannot expect to be recognised. Why do you make such a hermit of yourself?’

‘It is half-past three,’ murmured Mr. Fanshawe timidly from a corner. ‘And I have an appointment at four.’

‘I am coming, Henry, but I must first try to make Mr. Lee promise that he will let us see him occasionally. Now you will, Mr. Lee, won’t you?’

‘I never go into company,’ said Raymond, half mechanically. This was the stereotyped answer which he made to all such overtures, and he made it now according to his rule, but even as the words passed his lips he half regretted that his rule was so very absolute.

‘Oh! but I won’t hear of any excuses. Come, Mr. Lee, it isn’t fair, really, that you should not give us an opportunity of returning your hospitalities. After the pleasant morning we have spent here—at least I don’t mean that, for of course it has been very dreadful and heart-rending, but it would have been pleasant, you know, under other circum-

stances—after all the kindness you have shown us, I should say—it would be positively shabby to withdraw and never let yourself be seen or heard of again. You must fix a day for coming to us, upon my word you must. Now when do you think will suit you best? We are expecting a few friends to dinner this week, on—let me see, what day, my love?’

‘The day after to-morrow,’ said the young lady. ‘It will be Wednesday, you know.’

She half turned her head towards Raymond as she added this explanation. The movement seemed almost unconscious, but he could not help noticing it, and feeling that she had endorsed the invitation.

‘Yes, Wednesday—you are quite right, dear. Will that suit you, Mr. Lee? Come, I am sure you can’t object—it is to be quite a quiet, friendly affair—only three or four besides ourselves. You can’t say no to that, can you?’

He could neither say no nor yes for a few moments. It was such an unheard-of thing with him to go to a dinner-party that it seemed out of the question to accept, and yet, when he came to think of it, he did not exactly know why he should not. In his indecision he glanced in the direction of the young lady. She had been looking towards him, and for an instant their eyes met.

‘Well?’ persisted Mrs. Fanshawe. ‘Silence gives consent, and you will come, won’t you?’

‘You are very kind,’ he replied with an effort. ‘As you wish it, I will.’

‘An appointment at four,’ groaned Mr. Fanshawe despairingly.

‘Very well, Henry, I am quite ready. Goodbye, Mr. Lee—we shall be so delighted to see you. Seven o’clock on Wednesday—don’t forget.’

Raymond shook his head and smiled. He did not say it, but he knew that the sense of being under an engagement to a dinner-party was a great deal too novel and too oppressive to admit of forgetfulness.

Mrs. Fanshawe gathered the folds of her shawl around her, and the rustling silks and gauzy tissues which for a while had filled Raymond's room with incongruous brightness fluttered out of it again. He did not stay behind to contemplate the effect of their disappearance, but followed the ladies to their carriage, which was waiting for them at the factory-gates. Here a friendly farewell was said, Mrs. Fanshawe shaking hands with her new acquaintance very warmly, and the young lady following her example, though a little timidly and undecidedly. And yet his fingers retained the sensation of her light touch longer than that of Mrs. Fanshawe's cordial grasp. Then there was a great deal of packing and adjustment of drapery, and a great deal of smoothing and shaking out of lace trimmings; but at last, to Mr. Fanshawe's infinite satisfaction, the whole party was safely stowed, and the carriage rolled off, leaving Raymond to look after it and wonder what infatuation had taken hold of him that he stood committed to a dinner-party on Wednesday.

'Well, I am quite pleased he is coming,' said Mrs. Fanshawe, as soon as they were in motion. 'I think we have made a real acquisition, eh, my dear?'

'I don't know—I suppose so,' said Minna carelessly, twiddling with the tassel of her parasol.

'And we may take it as a wonderful compliment that he did not refuse point-blank. I never heard of his going into company before. Though I know several people who have tried to get him to their parties, but he has always held

back. How surprised they will be when they hear of his being at our house! It is really something extraordinary.'

'What an odd person he must be!' said Minna, re-adjusting the tassel, which she had nearly pulled off.

'He must be rather eccentric, I suppose, but it does not show so much as you might expect. I had always imagined him to be a kind of barbarian, or I should not have been so long to-day in finding out who he was. It was rather stupid of us, though, for he is much too gentlemanly for a clerk or anything of that kind. You thought him very gentlemanly, didn't you?'

'Oh yes! he was gentlemanly,' said Minna indifferently, as though referring to something in the far-away past which had altogether ceased to interest her.

'He is good-looking too,' said Mrs. Fanshawe, with a critical air. 'Yes—for a man—decidedly good-looking.'

There was a pause, but Minna did not take the opportunity of making a remark.

'I suppose he is very well off,' went on the lady, looking at her husband. 'His business is first-rate, I believe?'

'First-rate,' said Mr. Fanshawe with an unwonted gleam of enthusiasm. 'Wonderful paying concern—quite wonderful—and lots of ready money. Why, he paid away thirty thousand the other day as if it had been so much water—money he didn't owe a farthing of. Very unbusiness-like, you know.'

'Oh yes! I heard about that—something connected with that horrid father of his, wasn't it? An honourable feeling on his part, no doubt, though I can't see myself that there was any call for such a thing. But the fact of his being able to afford it shows he must be very rich.'

‘He is rich,’ said Mr. Fanshawe emphatically. ‘Pretty near the richest man in St. Austin’s, I should think.’

Still Minna made no remark. But secretly she was very glad to hear what Mr. Fanshawe thought.

CHAPTER IV.

BEFORE THE GLASS.

MRS. FANSHAWE’S adopted daughter—Minnie Haroldson formerly, Minna Fanshawe now—was at this time just twenty-one years of age.

The promise of her childhood had been more than fulfilled, and Miss Fanshawe was by common consent the reigning beauty of St. Austin’s. But to the surprise of all her friends and acquaintances, she remained Miss Fanshawe still; and, in spite of numerous admirers, had completed her twenty-first year without pledging her hand to any of them.

The truth was, she, and Mrs. Fanshawe for her, could afford to be fastidious, and, knowing it, felt themselves in no kind of hurry. If Minna’s heart had been touched, she might not perhaps have been able to be so solidly sensible in her views, but hitherto it had been altogether quiescent in the matter. When a girl is brought up to see a great deal of society, especially if she is beautiful and early seasoned to adulation, she is not apt to surrender her affections to the first comer. It is the plain girls, those to whom a soft word or lover-like attention is as manna in the wilderness, who are most given to be romantically impressionable; and even in their case susceptibility gets its edges wonderfully rubbed off by contact with the world and the

habit of seeing a constant succession of new faces. So that Minna, thoroughly versed in society and accustomed from childhood to receive admiration as her right, was comparatively safe against having her head turned by the homage of an individual adorer, and had passed fancy-free and heart-whole through the fire of innumerable sieges. And being thus under no interior compulsion or impulsion, she was content to wait before making her selection.

Mrs. Fanshawe preferred to wait also. She was determined that when Minna married it should be somebody whom all the mothers of St. Austin's should envy her for having secured as a son-in-law, and no one had yet presented himself who in her eyes came quite up to the prescribed standard of eligibility. Nor did she much regret the delay. Naturally she was not very impatient to part with any share in the adopted daughter whom she had been at so much pains to obtain, and whose companionship had proved the most effectual cure for ennui she had ever tried; and indeed she would probably not have endured the notion of any change in the present state of things save for the spirit of rivalry inspired by the example of others. But she looked round and saw other mothers of marriageable daughters busy in disposing of their girls to the best advantage, and felt that she would be eternally disgraced if she did not succeed as well for her beautiful Minna as the most skilful and fortunate chaperon of them all. And thus it was a settled thing in Mrs. Fanshawe's mind that, though there was no particular hurry about it, Minna should one day make a match of peculiar excellence.

Without any spoken explanation or overt interchange of ideas, Mrs. Fanshawe's views on this subject were fully understood and fully entered into by the young lady herself.

That she should in due time marry, and marry well, was a thesis which, though she had never enunciated it or heard it enunciated, Minna never dreamed of doubting. Not that she cumbered herself greatly about the matter, but thus much she took for granted simply because she never thought of contemplating the possibility of anything different. Other young ladies got married, or else were pitied for not getting married; and, as the idea of being pitied was not to be harboured in Minna's mind for an instant, it followed that she would get married too. Then, as to the high external qualifications of her future husband, whoever he was to be, they were equally a matter of course. Other young ladies tried to secure for themselves by their marriage as much wealth and as good a position as possible, their success being usually in the ratio of their own attractiveness; and Minna, having reason to know that her attractiveness was very great, could not doubt that her success would be proportionately splendid.

Perhaps it showed a want of originality of intellect that she never asked herself if this kind of success would really be most conducive to her happiness, but Minna did not set up to be an original thinker, and it had not occurred to her to consider the question. She knew the kind of marriage that would be pronounced by family and friends a 'good match,' knew that she was expected to make a good match, and never thought of doing otherwise. The possibility of marrying a poor man and being happy with him had never entered her head in her wildest moods of speculation; and if it had, she would forthwith have dismissed the notion as a hypothetical infraction of her duty to society, to herself, and to the adopted mother who had rescued her from poverty as a brand from the burning. For though Minna's love for

Mrs. Fanshawe unwittingly fell far short of that which a child ought to bear towards a parent, she had a great idea of how much she owed her. Often when she saw a girl of her own age shabbily dressed and under-educated, she would almost shudder to think that this might have been her case too, and would inwardly feel very grateful to dear mamma.

It will be seen that Minna loved the world and the good things thereof. But then she had been taught to love them, and must not be too harshly judged for having learned her lesson. And, whatever her faults were, she was not altogether without virtues. If she was worldly, she was not heartless—though these are adjectives which usually go together. She had learned to be a fine lady, and to prefer purple and fine linen to serge and fustian; but she had not learned to be selfish or cold-blooded, and would have dressed all mankind in purple and fine linen if she could, without stopping to inquire by what hands the future manufacture of those becoming fabrics was to be carried on. She was fundamentally good-natured, and not even the long course of spoiling she had undergone had been able to make her otherwise. Her very attachment to her own privileges rendered her pitiful and tender-hearted towards those who could not share them. She was of the earth, earthy, in her exaggerated appraisement of the wealth and refinement which had fallen to her lot—fancying indeed that life must be a kind of blank without them—but she would have been willing and glad that all the world should be as affluent and refined as herself; and she had this of Heaven in her that she had a heart always ready to be moved with a tale of distress.

On the day appointed for Raymond Lee's first appearance in the Fanshawe mansion, Minna dressed for dinner with peculiar care, showing such indecision as to which colour and material best became her, and such fastidiousness in the disposition of her hair, as to render her maid's task much more than usually difficult. And even when her assistant had departed and her toilet was nominally complete, she was not content without a readjustment of its ornamental adjuncts, trying on one set of jewels after another, holding her pretty head first on this side to judge the effect of the emeralds, and then on that to catch the flash of the brilliants, and altogether looking a very image of perplexed deliberation.

At last she believed that she had found the exact kind and degree of decoration which best suited her; and, satisfied that the art of personal adornment could no further go, let one hand fall negligently by her side, held the other slightly lifted with a lace handkerchief gracefully pendent from it, and stood before her glass in complacent contemplation as a painter before his favourite picture.

For Minna was not one of the young ladies, if indeed such there be, who, possessing charms, are unconscious of them. She was beautiful and vain of her beauty—that is to say, she valued it highly, perhaps unduly, as she valued other glittering externals. But if in this she erred, she erred in common with a countless multitude of others, and with a better excuse than many. Had she not an instinctive sense that her beauty had procured her the favour of her aunt and set her in the position dear to her? and was she not warned by the same instinctive sense, that, her beauty lost, the tenure on which she held her other privileges would be, if not destroyed, at least sadly weakened?

She had always known herself to be beautiful and been glad of it, but to-day she seemed more glad of it than usual. A soft happy flush mantled on her cheeks as she gazed which could hardly have been caused by any amount of mere self-admiration. And indeed, though more than ordinarily interested in her mirror just now, it was not altogether of herself and her beauty that she was thinking. If she had put her thoughts into words and uttered them as they arose (but she would not have been heard talking such nonsense for the world), they would have run something in this strain:

‘I am looking very well to-day—really very well indeed. He will think so too, if he has any eyes at all. He is sure to come—oh! of course he will come—he doesn’t seem like a person who would break his word. Yes, uncommonly well, certainly—so much better than the other day with that dowdy bonnet. I don’t think I will ever enter the woman’s shop again—she had no business to give me those common flowers. But they say men don’t observe things of that sort—very likely he never saw them. How stupid he must be! Then perhaps he won’t notice how beautiful my white arm looks with the coral bracelet. Well, never mind; it will help the general effect. And so he is actually coming to dine with us—he who never was known to accept an invitation in his life before. “I never go into company;” those were his very words. And it is quite true, for we never met him anywhere. Very strange that he is coming, really. It can’t be to please papa; he is too rich to care about pleasing anybody—the richest man in St. Austin’s, papa said. And yet there must be some reason, one would think. I wonder what it is.’

And then the soft flush on her cheeks grew deeper, and

her bright lips parted in a self-conscious smile. She had made a theory of her own as to the reason, and the theory pleased her.

As has already been said, Minna had not hitherto shown herself susceptible, but in Raymond Lee she was undeniably interested. He had been the means of gratifying her vanity, and of gratifying it in an altogether new way. She had heard her praises spoken, till praises palled upon her ear; she had seen herself followed and worshipped by young ball-room dandies, till her appetite for their admiration was cloyed. But she had never yet seen what she saw now—a staid mature man (he looked almost middle-aged to her), of reserved tastes and demeanour (dreadfully stern she inwardly pronounced him), break through a life-long habit for the sake of a few hours of her society. The idea that she was the cause of so extraordinary a revolution as that implied in Raymond Lee's promised appearance at a dinner-party was a new sensation; and its novelty re-acted in his favour by making her think of him with an interest she had never yet felt in any one, and look forward to his coming with strange inquisitive expectancy. She wanted to see him again, and find out whether he was really so grave and thoughtful as he had seemed the other day; above all, she wanted to know how he would bear himself in her presence and what he would say to her.

But the dinner hour had nearly struck, and it was time to put an end to this pleasant communion with her mirror. She threw off her reverie with somewhat of an effort, and, having once more satisfied herself that nothing was wanting to the completeness of her toilet, turned away and issued from her room—a warrior armed cap-a-pie bound for the field of battle.

There were some half-dozen people sitting and standing in the drawing-room as she entered, but Raymond Lee was not yet among them— she knew that at once, even before she had time to take note of those actually present.

As Mrs. Fanshawe had said, the party was to be a very small one, and with the exception of Raymond it was already assembled. The Fanshawes seldom gave dinner-parties, Minna having all a young lady's aversion to such ponderous festivities; and when they did, which was generally when Mr. Fanshawe wanted to please some business friend, it was almost always on a small scale. To-day it was a Mr. and Mrs. Hodgetts who, from Mr. Fanshawe's point of view, were the principal guests, and in whose honour the party had been originally proposed—Mr. Hodgetts being a sleepy-looking man of the heavy-father type, and Mrs. Hodgetts a stout well-meaning lady in amber-coloured satin, who was decidedly not good style, but who was just tolerated in the Fanshawe circle for the sake of her husband. To talk to Mr. Hodgetts a Mr. Tomlinson had been invited—a gentleman in the heavy-father line also, whose chief characteristics were plenty of hard cash and a turn for enunciating with peculiar unction gloomy views on financial and all other matters. Then, to counterbalance all this coarse commercial element and give a flavouring of fashionable refinement to the gathering, it had been considered necessary to secure the company of Mrs. Vesey and her daughter, the latter now developed into a tall dashing girl of some three or four-and-twenty.

It was not often indeed now that Mrs. Fanshawe had a party which was not graced by these ladies, they receiving the material advantages of unlimited ice and champagne in return for the aristocratic sanction imparted to an enter-

tainment by their presence. It is true that there was not much love lost between the two matrons, or the two young ladies either for that matter; but each set was useful to the other, and each deemed it desirable to keep up the appearance of a friendship a good deal warmer than was really felt. The task was difficult occasionally on both sides. Mrs. Vesey's temper had suffered by years of painful striving to get the greatest possible amount of show out of small and gradually diminishing means; while Arabella's, poor thing, had been soured by a succession of matrimonial disappointments; and the spectacle of Mrs. Fanshawe's easy affluence and Minna's uncared-for conquests was sometimes almost too much for them. At such seasons they were apt to take viperish pleasure in remembering their own superior social status (for Mrs. Vesey still managed to retain a sort of footing in exclusive county society where the merchants and merchants' wives of St. Austin's were yet scarcely recognised), and gave themselves airs of patronising condescension which galled dear Mrs. and Miss Fanshawe not a little. Under these provocations Mrs. Fanshawe kept her temper admirably, all things considered; but as for Minna, she was often on the point of open rebellion, and in spite of all her good-nature was conscious of disliking her friends very intensely.

On entering the drawing-room to-day, Minna seated herself by Mrs. Vesey because a chair happened to be so placed that she could not have avoided taking it without rudeness. But she had not been conversing with that lady five minutes when she made an excuse for getting away again, and presently she had glided up to where Mrs. Fanshawe sat talking to Mrs. Hodgetts.

'Mamma,' whispered Minna, taking advantage of a pause

in the conversation, and Mrs. Fanshawe knew from the tone of her voice that she had come to disburden herself of a grievance.

‘What is it, my darling?’ was the sympathizing response, unheard by Mrs. Hodgetts, who had fortunately become interested in some very dispiriting remarks of Mr. Tomlinson on prevailing meteorological influences.

‘Oh! mamma, that horrid Mrs. Vesey! No, don’t look at her, or she will know we are talking of her, and I couldn’t bear her to imagine that she has vexed me. What do you think? She has been asking me if we are invited to Lady Fitz-John’s *fête*, and then pretending to be so sorry that she won’t have the pleasure of meeting us.’

‘Nasty creature!’ commented Mrs. Fanshawe, a little more emphatically than usual, for the entertainment in question was one to which she had made great interest to be invited, and not without some faint hopes of success. ‘Then does she mean to say that the invitations are issued already?’

‘Of course,’ answered Minna pettishly, ‘and is boasting at no allowance of having got one for herself and Arabella. And oh! mamma, it is so provoking.’

‘It is strange certainly,’ said Mrs. Fanshawe musingly. ‘But never mind, dear, where there are so many to ask, the invitations can’t be all made out at once, you know. There is plenty of time still—more than three weeks yet. I believe Lady Fitz-John makes out the list of guests herself, and I should say that on such an occasion, when everybody is anxious to welcome home the young heir, a mother would be very careful how she created invidious feeling by omitting any family of the slightest local importance.’

And Mrs. Fanshawe drew herself up as if she thought her importance was very great, and almost more than local.

‘Mrs. Vesey’ must have been very sure of her ground before she asked the question,’ said Minna ruefully. ‘Horrid, spiteful thing—she would never have wanted to know if she had thought there was a chance of our going. Oh! mamma, is it not’ . . .

She stopped suddenly, conscious that the door had just been thrown open and that on the threshold appeared a tall dark figure which was that of Raymond Lee.

CHAPTER V.

SOCIETY.

YEARS had passed since last Raymond Lee had entered a room where guests were assembled; and though he knew himself to be sufficiently familiar with social usages to be in no danger of committing any specially glaring solecism, he was aware of an inner confusion and perturbation which no one would have suspected under his calm and composed exterior. His brain was, as it were, in a whirl, and there was a kind of haze before all his senses which prevented him from being more than dimly conscious of mechanically advancing amid a hum of voices to shake hands with Mr. and Mrs. Fanshawe, and with a radiant creature in bright apparel from whom all the light in the room seemed to emanate, and whom it appeared absurdly prosaic to call or even to think of as Miss Fanshawe.

His thoughts had been in strange turmoil for the last two days. He could hardly understand his own acceptance of Mrs. Fanshawe’s invitation, and had hesitated almost up to the last moment whether he would not after all do well to get out of the engagement with an excuse, and to forget the

episode of the other day as a foolish dream out of all harmony with the waking conditions of his life. But then he remembered—and the remembrance came as a bright and welcome suggestion—that the conditions of his life now were other than they had been. He had kept out of society hitherto because he had felt ashamed of showing his face in it; but now that he had marked his abhorrence of his father's misdeeds by taxing himself to repair them, what cause had he to feel ashamed more? So far as he had been disgraced by what was never fault of his, the disgrace was wiped out now by his own voluntary act of reparation; and he was free, if so it pleased him, to resume his rightful place in the world. Since those outstanding six hundred pounds had been paid to John Haroldson, he had been the equal of other men, free to go where they went, to do as they did, ay, if he chose, to compete with them on even terms for any the highest prize he might feel a mind to win. And, arguing thus, he had decided to go to Mrs. Fanshawe's dinner, partly as an act of self-assertion, partly out of a strange undefinable curiosity to see more of the bright butterfly creature whose gay wings had whisked so incongruously the other day through his dull office-parlour.

And now he was actually in her presence again, and found its effect still the same, making him feel dizzy and bewildered, as though dazzled with excess of light.

Presently—before it was necessary for him to say more than the few matter-of-course words of greeting which rose mechanically to his lips—there was a general rustling of ladies' dresses, and creaking of gentlemen's boots; and Raymond, still in a kind of dream, found himself going into the next room with a lady on his arm who had been introduced to him as Mrs. Vesey. He had lost sight of Minna for the

time being, nor did he find her again at the dinner-table, where he took his seat between his hostess on the one hand and Mrs. Vesey on the other, with a row of unknown faces fronting him. But soon he heard a low silvery laugh sounding from his own side of the table two or three places further down, and he knew that the light-beaming presence was not far off.

He was conscious of nothing at first save this fact, and the disagreeable prevalence of an inarticulate noise compounded of the buzz of tongues and the tinkle of knives and forks. But gradually, as the novelty of the situation wore off, the Babel of sounds began to resolve itself into separate and distinguishable elements, and he was able to follow with tolerable exactness what was being said.

It was a pity that he listened, for in a very few minutes he became disgusted and even angry with every member of the party save one. He had been so long out of the world that he had forgotten how difficult it is to keep up a conversation among casual acquaintances which to an attentive critic, especially if he be one who himself takes little or no part in it, shall not sound supremely shallow and inane. He forgot that it was necessary for those people to say something, and almost equally necessary that they should choose some subject of common interest—the fashions or a small bit of social gossip for the ladies, the funds or the rate of discount for the gentlemen, the weather as an occasional rallying-point for both sexes; and he was too mercilessly sweeping and bitter in his inferences as to the empty-headedness and empty-heartedness implied in the selection of themes and the mode of treatment.

The more he listened, the more the misanthropical spirit of censorship was stirred, and, with his contempt for the

meanness and narrowness of soul which to his thinking nearly every remark betrayed, his indignation waxed also. The latter feeling was unreasonable doubtless, but he could not help it when he thought how the prate of those coarse material-minded worldlings must sound in the ears of the pure ethereal being whom he could not see, but whose voice occasionally reached him like a breath of soft music. It seemed to him a kind of profanation that this sordid frivolous small-talk should be going on in the presence of her whom he knew to be sitting yonder in all the glory of her clear sunny beauty—her who was so manifestly different from the rest in the unworldly freshness of her nature that the only wonder was how she could have grown up among them. For the very bitterness of his scorn and almost hatred for the others tended but to brighten the ideal to which they served as foil; and Minna never looked to Raymond so nearly perfection as now when he sat fuming with silent contempt and dislike for her friends and family.

Surely if they could have known his feelings, the Hodgetts and Veseys and the rest of them would have had great cause to complain of the unjust partiality of his judgments. The conversation was certainly not very brilliant or improving, but neither in point of morality nor of intellect was it conspicuously below the average of dinner discourse in general; while the slight share contributed to it by Miss Fanshawe would hardly have suggested to an unbiassed listener that there was any particular profanity perpetrated by holding it in her presence. Take, as an example, the last quarter of an hour which preceded the withdrawal of the ladies, and it cannot be said that Raymond heard anything to justify the state of suppressed wrath and indignation into which he had lashed himself.

MRS. FANSHAWE. Well, I never thought her pretty, did you?

MRS. VESEY. Decidedly plain, in my opinion.

MRS. FANSHAWE. She called the other day in one of those new-shaped bonnets. I suppose it did not become her, for I thought her looking so old.

MRS. VESEY. She can't be very young now, you know.

MR. FANSHAWE. The last quotation was twenty-eight to twenty-eight and a half.

MR. TOMLINSON. You'll see it won't be above twenty-three next time. Such things are sure to come down with a run.

MRS. HODGETTS. Do you like the new shape?

MRS. FANSHAWE. I hardly know; so much depends on the trimming.

UNSEEN DIVINITY. Well, for my part, I like all the fashions this season. And as for the new colour, I am quite charmed with it.

MR. TOMLINSON. Mark my words, it won't last. My opinion is . . .

MRS. HODGETTS. Law now, Mr. Tomlinson, do you really think it won't? I've been told it was so wonderfully fast.

MR. TOMLINSON. (*Looking at her sternly in resentment of the interruption.*) I was referring to the present unexampled activity of tallow.

MRS. HODGETTS. Tallow! Ugh! how nasty! About the new colour, as I was saying, the only objection to it is, it don't become all complexions.

MR. TOMLINSON. It will drop—see if it don't drop.

MR. FANSHAWE. Looks firm for the present, though. Help yourself, Mr. Hodgetts.

MR. HODGETTS. Thank you, I don't mind if I do. Good port this.

MR. TOMLINSON. Very fair, very fair. (*Holding his glass up with an air of satisfaction.*) Do you know they say that after five years more there won't be another drop imported?

MR. HODGETTS. (*Startled.*) How so, how so?

MR. TOMLINSON. Something wrong in the vines, they say. Yes (*with increased cheerfulness*) 'it's a bad look-out, but you may take my word' it is the deficiency of ozone that is at the bottom of it all. My belief is that a gradual deterioration of the atmosphere is taking place everywhere. Look at the weather to-day, you can't call it natural, can you?

MRS. FANSHAW. Well, it has been rather warm for the time of year, certainly.

MRS. VESEY. Very fatiguing weather I call it. And Arabella and I have so much to do just now—I can't tell you how tired we are. We were at St. Cecilia's Hall all morning superintending the arrangements.

MRS. HODGETTS. The bazaar is to be the day after to-morrow, isn't it?

MRS. VESEY. Yes, and you can't imagine how many little things there are to be thought of now that the time is so near. I am sure if it was not in the hope of doing some trifle of good, nothing would ever induce me to undertake a stall—nothing. I am quite worn out, and so is that poor girl, are you not, dear?

MISS VESEY. (*Smiling faintly, and pressing her hand for an instant on her brow to still its throbbing.*) It is of no consequence, dear mamma. Only a bad headache.

MR. HODGETTS. A capital investment, depend upon it. One of the best things going.

UNSEEN DIVINITY. I suppose it will be a very gay affair.

MR. FANSHAW. Five-and-twenty per cent.

MRS. VESEY. Oh! everybody will be there. Those little hand-screens of yours look so nice, Miss Fanshawe. I expect to have quite a crowd of competitors for them.

MR. TOMLINSON. Very fine, very fine, but what do you call the security?

UNSEEN DIVINITY. I think the design is rather pretty. Mrs. Wilks saw them before they were sent off, and was so pleased with them that I have had to do another pair just like them for her stall.

MRS. VESEY. Poor Mrs. Wilks! what an odd person she is! (*Turning to RAYMOND graciously.*) You are going to patronise us, I hope, Mr. Lee?

RAYMOND. (*Stiffly.*) Patronise you! In what way?

MRS. VESEY. Why, the bazaar to be sure. Oh! Mr. Lee, you can't mean to say you don't know about the bazaar.

MR. HODGETTS. The last transaction was at a hundred and thirty.

RAYMOND. I never heard of it till this evening.

MRS. VESEY. Not the bazaar to be held at St. Cecilia's Hall next Friday and Saturday in aid of the Conversion of Old-Clothesmen in the Metropolis Fund? Well, Mr. Lee, you do surprise me. But you will go, won't you?

RAYMOND. Certainly not.

MRS. VESEY. Not? And why?

RAYMOND. My best reason is that I do not approve of bazaars.

MRS. VESEY. Oh fie! Mr. Lee—what harm did they ever do you?

RAYMOND. No harm to me, but no good to anybody else.

They are a machinery for getting pleasure under false pretences, and false pretences are never right.

MR. FANSHAW. Up at a premium just now.

MRS. VESEY. False pretences—what hard names! But surely, Mr. Lee, if there is a way of combining one's own pleasure with the benefit of others it must be so much the better, must it not?

RAYMOND. Not at all, juggling with charity and amusement is not so much the better, but so much the worse. It can't be good to treat the act of helping a poor neighbour as a pill which has to be sugared over before it is palatable.

MRS. VESEY. A pill! He! he! how funny! I beg your pardon, Mrs. Hodgetts—you were speaking to me?

MRS. HODGETTS. I was asking if you were aware—no more, thank you—if you were aware of a trustworthy person you could recommend as coachman—with a good pair-horse character, you know. Ours nearly overturned us the other day, and considering (*a little magniloquently*) that we pay the highest wages, it is rather hard we should be treated so. Such a one as you have would just suit us—so steady and respectable-looking. Let me see, it isn't you though; it must be Mrs. Jackson—you don't keep a carriage, I think.

MRS. VESEY. (*Smiling with amiable malignity.*) No. I wish I could help you, Mrs. Hodgetts, but good servants are the rarest articles in the world now-a-days. As Lady Fitz-John was remarking to me the other day, the *nouveaux riches* have quite spoiled the market.

MRS. FANSHAW. (*Secretly resentful.*) They are very scarce, certainly. But you must not complain, Mrs. Vesey, you have always been so fortunate. What a nice young

man that was you had some time ago! By the way, what made you part with him?

MRS. VESEY. (*Who, as MRS. FANSHAWE perfectly well knows, has recently made a forced descent from a genteel young man out of livery to a small boy in buttons.*) He was a good servant, I must say. But unfortunately I discovered that he was rather—well, how shall I put it—rather given to take more than was good for him, you understand. And when once a young man takes to that, there is not much hope left for him, in my opinion. It was better to get rid of him.

MRS. FANSHAWE. Oh! of course—quite necessary.

MRS. HODGETTS. (*Who does not understand French, and has been impressed with the familiarity of the reference to LADY FITZ-JOHN.*) You are well acquainted with her ladyship, Mrs. Vesey?

MRS. VESEY. Our families have always known each other. But, as you are aware, Lady Fitz-John has been a great deal out of England during her son's minority, so that for years we have had no opportunities of meeting.

MRS. HODGETTS. A beautifully furnished place, I believe?

MR. HODGETTS. Lord Fitz-John's? They say the cellars are the best stocked in the country.

MRS. HODGETTS. They won't hold out long if all tales are true. Do you know anything about that, Mrs. Vesey?

MRS. VESEY. About the cellars?

MRS. HODGETTS. No, no, about the young lord, I mean. Do you think it can be true what they say of his being so unsteady?

MRS. VESEY. Well, I don't know. We must not be too severe. People exaggerate so.

MRS. HODGETTS. I must say it looked very bad his stopping abroad last year when he came of age. Everybody expected him home to take possession and show himself to the tenantry, and especially after the old place had been let so long to strangers—it would have been only right of him.

MRS. VESEY. It would have been better of course. But . . .

MRS. HODGETTS. They say he was at some horrid foreign gambling-place all the time. Do you think that is true?

MR. TOMLINSON. Baden, to my own certain knowledge, and at the gaming-tables every night. I saw him there myself—when I was passing through, you know. A dreadful thing!

MRS. HODGETTS. Poor young man, how sad!

MR. TOMLINSON. He takes after his father, you see—no head for calculating odds. It won't be long before they have to put the estate into nursing again if he goes on at this rate. It's in the blood, I suppose.

MRS. HODGETTS. How very, very melancholy,!

MRS. VESEY. Oh! but we must hope for better things. Even if he has been a little wild it is never too late to mend, you know, and now that he is at home he is showing every disposition to do his duty. This *fête* next month is to be a splendid affair, I hear.

MRS. HODGETTS. (*Who has no expectation of being invited.*) Is it? Well, I wish they mayn't spend more on their housewarming than they can afford, but I suppose Lady Fitz-John will take care of that. (*Pauses a little acridly.*) I'm sure I pity her, poor thing, from the bottom of my heart, as I should pity any mother under such circumstances; still, as

you say, it is right to hope for the best, and wonders will never cease. Though I consider gambling a shocking vice, and I believe it isn't the worst thing he does, either. I don't know how true it may be, but I *have* heard he is rather too fond of (*Taps the rim of her wine-glass and nods expressively.*)

MRS. VESEY. Oh! dear, dear! what a pity such things should get about!

MRS. HODGETTS. (*Inquisitively.*) You have heard of it, too, then?

MRS. VESEY. No, no, you must not ask me what I have heard. Such a young man, you know—it isn't fair, really. It has always been my doctrine that one cannot be too lenient with young men of that age—don't you agree with me, Mr. Lee! They *must* go through a course of wild-oat-sowing and that sort of thing before settling down—mustn't they now?

RAYMOND. (*Savagely.*) I agree with you perfectly — in your admirable remark of a few minutes ago. When once a young man like Lord Fitz-John or your late footman takes to drinking and that sort of thing, there is not much hope left for him.

MRS. FANSHAW. (*With an interrogative look round the table at the ladies.*) Hem! Shall we . . .

(*Ladies all rise, and exeunt amid solemn silence.*)

It will be seen from this specimen of the conversation that Mrs. Vesey found her cavalier churlish, if not downright rude. He was indeed in most unreasonably ill humour, and with that lady more especially, having conceived a horrible dislike to her from the beginning. He had taken it into his head that she represented more perfectly than anybody else in the room the worldliness and conventionality with which

all save one were more or less tainted; and every word that passed her lips increased his prejudice against her, and his indignation that she should be allowed to breathe the same air with the pure saint-like maiden whom he knew to be sitting so near her. It was a positive relief to him when the woman was gone from his side, even though all the other ladies were gone too.

With the departure of the ladies the frivolous element dropped out of the conversation, and the sordid element became predominant. The talk was altogether of money and money-making, and Raymond sat listening, not perhaps quite so indignantly as before (for there was no unworldly spiritual-minded being present now whose ears it could offend), but with yet more disgust and weariness. He almost despised himself for enduring the company of those dull-brained heavy-souled grovellers who could find nothing better to discourse upon even in their hours of recreation than buying and selling; and was more than once tempted to invent excuse for leaving the table and the house, never to make an experiment of society again. But he thought of Minna, and forbore. He would like to see her and hear her at all events once again before returning to his exile, and therefore resigned himself to sit out the commercial slang of Mr. Fanshawe and his friends with marvellous patience.

At last the desired moment came, and Raymond found himself following the other gentlemen into the room whither the ladies had preceded them. He was immediately aware that Miss Fanshawe was seated at a side-table not far from the door, looking over a book of engravings with another lady. Yes, she was all that he had imagined — brighter and more sun-like even than his dull fancy could depict her.

The other lady was Mrs. Hodgetts, to whom Minna had

temporarily allied herself in order to spare her temper the infliction of Mrs. and Miss Vesey. But no sooner had the gentlemen entered than Mrs. Hodgetts started up to tap her Sam on the arm and ask him (he had *such* a memory for dates) whether it was three or four years ago that the Griffins returned from India, the detail being necessary to complete a story which she had been relating a quarter of an hour previously. Raymond felt positively grateful to the lady for her love of accuracy. For Minna was sitting quite by herself now, and, in moving to open a passage for Mrs. Hodgetts to her husband, Raymond was able, nay, was almost compelled, to draw some steps nearer the side-table.

Minna had never lifted her eyes since the door had opened to admit the gentlemen. But for all that, she was perfectly conscious that Mr. Lee was among them, conscious too that he had approached the table at the end of which she sat, and almost as conscious as he was himself that he was seeking something to say to her.

‘How different he is from those other creatures!’ she thought to herself as she riveted her eyes on the open page before her — the ‘other creatures’ being the young men from whom she had been in the habit of receiving incense. ‘So grand and strong and intellectual! I am sure he might be a great man if he chose.’

And yet from the moment of his entering the house that evening they had not exchanged a word.

At last he spoke, seizing the first common-place that came into his head, in despair of finding anything better worth saying.

‘Those seem to be very fine engravings, Miss Fanshawe.’

Could any of the people on whose insipidities he had been so severe during dinner have begun conversation in flatter,

tamer fashion? And he had not the smallest idea whether the engravings were fine or not — he could see nothing of them except their size. But after all, platitudes come more easily than anything else, and it is harder than one would think to be quite sincere in general society.

He was ashamed of himself for a moment, but the feeling was forgotten almost immediately. For the fair bent head was raised, and a pair of bright lips answered;

‘Yes, it is rather a nice collection, I think. Do you happen to know it?’

Diplomatic Minna! Of course Raymond could not answer the question without coming round to her side to see what the collection was. And when he was there, what so natural as that he should drop into the unoccupied chair which Mrs. Hodgetts had vacated?

‘No,’ said Raymond, after an inspection, perhaps unnecessarily prolonged, of the title-page. ‘May I look at some of them?’

And then he seated himself as might have been expected.

‘This first one is rather pretty,’ said Minna, and she was really quite surprised to find how tremulous her voice was. ‘The landscape is so well done — don’t you think so? But the next is my favourite — it is the best of the whole series, in my opinion. Look, here it is — King Cophetua and the Beggar-maid; is it not beautiful?’

‘What is it that you are admiring so much, Minna dear?’ cried a female voice behind. ‘I must positively come and have a look.’

The speaker was Mrs. Vesey, who, having heard something of Raymond’s wealth, was willing to give him another chance in spite of his churlishness. Besides, she did not choose that Miss Fanshawe should enjoy an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête*

with him while her own Arabella was sitting with nobody to talk to.

‘A charming thing really!’ she pronounced when she had put up her eye-glass. ‘What an exquisite face the girl’s is—so simple and unaffected! Quite justifies the king’s choice, eh? And that old courtier — oh dear! how scandalised he is looking! it is quite absurd. He is put in to represent the world, I suppose — the hard, cold, hollow-hearted world. But the king doesn’t mind a bit; he knows he is right, and that’s enough for him. Ah! a delicious subject — so fresh and — what do you call it — pastoral, you know. What are those lines at the bottom of the page, dear? I can’t read them from here.’

‘A motto,’ said Minna coldly, for she was highly displeased at what she considered Mrs. Vesey’s unwarrantable intrusion.

‘A motto! And what does it say? Excuse me, dear;’ and Mrs. Vesey approached her face a little nearer the page and slowly read off the following words:

‘Silver and gold, and long descent,
What do they bring of true content?

Let them be!

I seek a bride with richer store —
A loving heart, though nothing more.

This is she.’

‘Charming! quite charming!’ was again her comment. ‘A sweet idea, and so delightfully put.’

‘A loving heart, though nothing more.’

That’s the bit that takes my fancy.’

‘May I turn over now?’ asked Minna, fingering the leaf impatiently. She was angry, and hardly cared to conceal it.

But though Minna was curt and Raymond scowled, Mrs. Vesey still kept her ground and her temper.

‘Turn over? Oh yes! certainly; I am quite ready. And what is the next pretty thing you have to show us? Petrarch and Laura — ah! very well done too. By the way, have you seen anything of Laura Brown since her marriage?’

‘Not yet. I don’t think mamma intends to call.’

‘Does she not? Well, I think she is quite right — if people choose to marry into an inferior social position they must take the consequences.’

‘I suppose so,’ said Minna a little regretfully. ‘Poor Laura! I hope she is happy.’

‘Oh: I dare say they are happy enough just now, for I believe they are madly in love with each other. But how can it last, I should like to know? A clerk with two hundred a-year — a dreadful *mésalliance* to be sure. Such a shabby little house I hear they are settled in — and only one servant, of course.’

‘And is it not possible that happiness can last in a shabby little house with only one servant?’ asked Raymond, looking up with sudden fierceness. He would have annihilated the woman if he could for daring to talk thus in Minna’s presence. ‘Or is it only in poetry and pictures that we can afford to be fresh and pastoral?’

‘What is that, Mr. Lee? I don’t quite understand,’ asked Mrs. Vesey, slightly disturbed by this vehemence.

‘Nothing—nothing. It is a pretty line that about a loving heart and nothing more, but the doctrine is only to be taken æsthetically of course. A *mésalliance* in art and a *mésalliance* in real life are two very different things, and so King Co-phetua would have found out if he had worn a chimney-pot hat and a dress coat. Ah yes! the old courtier would have

had it all his own way then. A hard, cold, hollow-hearted world, isn't it?

Mrs. Vesey bit her lip; without fully comprehending Raymond's drift, she understood that she was being treated very rudely.

'I am afraid Arabella is sitting in a draught,' she said, turning away her head as though not hearing him. 'Excuse me, dear' (to Minna), 'I must go and speak to her.'

And she swept off majestically, determined to meddle no more with Mr. Lee for that evening.

'Poor Mrs. Vesey! only see how you have frightened her away,' said Minna, turning round to Raymond with one of her archest smiles.

He was penitent and humble in a moment.

'I have been very rude,' he stammered. 'I am sorry, but' . . .

'Oh! don't be sorry, Mr. Lee, pray—not on my account, at least. To tell you the truth I am rather pleased than otherwise to see her routed—she has always been a pet aversion of mine.'

'You don't like her? I am glad of it,' said Raymond warmly. 'But indeed I should have been surprised to hear that you did, she seems so thoroughly worldly and conventional.'

'I don't know about that, but I don't like her. Still I could almost have pitied her just now—you were so dreadfully hard upon her. A little too hard perhaps. For though all my sympathies were on your side, Mr. Lee, I think she might have found a good deal to say for herself if she had chosen—really I do.'

She shook her golden curls and laughed a low musical laugh. Raymond sat looking at her the while (he could not

look away from her), and thought he had never seen anything half so beautiful.

She made a short pause, and then resumed. She was clever, and could not resist the temptation of letting Raymond see it.

‘For you know, Mr. Lee, poetry and real life really *are* different things, after all, and what sounds very well in the one isn’t so pleasant to practise in the other. A real King Cophetua wouldn’t have taken a real beggar-maid, I am sure, for a real beggar-maid wouldn’t have had those nice ribbon-streamers down her back, or those beautiful white hands, but would have been an untidy creature, dreadfully freckled and sunburnt, and talking with a horrid Irish accent. And then King Cophetua did not propose love in a cottage, did he? “This beggar-maid shall be my queen,” he says in Tennyson’s version, which is the only one I know. And I have no doubt they found out afterwards that she was somebody’s daughter changed at nurse with an immense fortune—they always do in all the poems and romances I ever read. But it would not be safe to trust to that in real life; at least if I were a king I should be afraid of running the risk. You see I am a very prosaic, practical person.’

Was Raymond angry with her for this open profession of cynicism? Not the least in the world. Coming from Mrs. Vesey, such a speech would have been accurately noted by him and every word set down as a new reason for detesting the speaker; coming from Minna, its sense was almost lost on him. He had never seen her speak with such animation before, and was attending too eagerly to the play of her features and the inflexions of her voice to take in the meaning of what she said. He was aware indeed that she left off with declaring herself prosaic and practical, but instead of

being shocked he only felt amused — amused at the incongruity of the words with the dainty lips that uttered them.

‘You are laughing at me now, Mr. Lee,’ she said poutingly, detecting the smile on his face. ‘Have I been saying anything so very ridiculous?’

‘It sounds so, I confess, to hear you apply such inappropriate epithets to yourself.’

‘Inappropriate! And pray who told you that they are inappropriate?’

‘There are things one knows without being told,’ he answered with a half grave, half smiling, glance at her beautiful face.

‘Ah! but this is a thing you cannot know, Mr. Lee. In the first place, it is not true, for the epithets are very appropriate indeed, and in the next, you have had no means of forming an opinion on the subject. You are very rash in leaping to conclusions, certainly. Why, you have only known me since the day before yesterday.’

The day before yesterday! It seemed almost incredible to herself that their acquaintance had been so recent. A whole age appeared to have passed since the day she had seen him first in the factory-yard.

‘And the poor man who was hurt?’ she inquired, her thoughts reverting to the incident which had been the cause of their meeting. ‘I have been thinking of him so often. He is going on well, I hope?’

She did hope so very strongly. The man had never done anything for her, and yet somehow she felt grateful to him. And Raymond did not lose the sense of her words this time, but caught at them greedily as a new proof of the beauty of her nature.

‘He is going on almost better than we had hoped. And he shall want for nothing, either now or on his recovery, you may depend on it,’ he added emphatically.

The poor fellow was in luck certainly, as he would have said could he have known how kindly his employer thought of him.

Minna pondered a few seconds, and then asked:

‘Do you think the doctors would allow him to have anything nicer than their horribly wholesome dry toast and water-gruel? Anything like jellies or preserved fruits, I mean?’

‘Well, I dare say he is almost well enough now to venture on an imprudence.’

‘Then mamma will send a basket to the hospital to-morrow,’ said Minna, almost clapping her hands with enthusiasm at the prospect.

‘You can be practical in some things, Miss Fanshawe,’ said Raymond smiling. ‘But not prosaic, remember I don’t admit that.’

‘Ah! but I am, dreadfully prosaic.’

‘If you were, you and that lady’ (indicating Mrs. Vesey) ‘would be sworn friends. And you say you don’t like her.’

‘I certainly don’t, and never shall. Do you think her so very prosaic then?’

‘One of the most prosaic-minded persons I have ever met.’

‘How you do dislike her, to be sure! But I knew you did from the very first. I heard what you were saying to her at dinner, Mr. Lee.’

‘I forget now what it was all about. I hope I was not very rude.’

‘About bazaars, you know, for one thing. And really I

thought you were too severe upon them. Pleasure and business go together sometimes, and so do pleasure and instruction—or rather amusement and instruction, that's the phrase—and why should pleasure and charity be a forbidden combination?

'I think charity ought to be in itself a pleasure which needs none other to increase it,' said Raymond, hesitatingly. He did not feel nearly so confident of his position now that he had Minna for an antagonist.

'Yes, but if in point of fact we can increase it and serve the interests of charity at the same time?' persisted Minna. 'For my own part, I think bazaars may be made to do a great deal of good.' She paused a moment somewhat undecidedly, and presently inquired: 'I suppose then, with your views, there is no chance of your being at St. Cecilia's Hall on Friday?'

'I never mix in any such gaieties,' said Raymond, and there was a shade of regret in his voice as he spoke. 'Not that my conscience is so strict as to make me think there would be any harm in it,' he added hastily.

'No, no, I understand; you object to being bored, that's all. And it would bore you, no doubt' (a little sigh here). 'Though I am weak enough to look forward to it rather. They say the hall is to be so splendidly decorated, and we are sure to have some beautiful music. You have heard of Stringer and Wyndham's band, I suppose? Oh! I know we shall have a great treat.'

'I think I must try to hear that band,' said Raymond, looking a good deal embarrassed. 'Friday is the day, you say?'

'Yes, the day on which we are going at least. There are to be two days of it, you know—Friday and Saturday.'

'Friday would suit me best,' said Raymond.

Neither Minna nor Raymond was tired of the interview, but it was interrupted here by Mrs. Hodgetts, who came up to ask Miss Fanshawe to favour the company with some music. Nor was there any opportunity of renewing it, for, after Minna and Arabella had each contributed two or three songs and pieces to the evening's entertainment, Mrs. Hodgetts' carriage was announced, and a general break-up of the guests took place.

Surely no guests had ever gone from the house whose departure left Minna in so strange a flutter. Her eyes had met Raymond's at parting, and his had been, or had seemed to her, so full of tenderness and reverential homage that she would sooner have had that look than another half-hour of undisturbed dialogue.

'How wonderfully expressive they are!' was her inward comment as she listened to the outer door closing upon him—the plural pronoun referring to Raymond's eyes. 'The finest I ever saw, and so expressive. He is enormously clever—anybody may see that; the cleverest man in the world almost, I should think. And so stern and severe with everybody except me. Mrs. Vesey was quite afraid of him, and no wonder—he put her down so beautifully. But I am not afraid of him—ah no! Something tells me he could not be angry with me even if he tried.'

Her meditations were disturbed by an exclamation from Mrs. Fanshawe, who was opening a note which had been put into her hand in the course of the evening.

'Minna, my darling child! what do you think? It's the invitation after all. Didn't I tell you so?'

'What invitation?' asked Minna absently.

'Why, child, Lady Fitz-John's invitation of course. There, what do you think of that?'

At the beginning of the evening Minna would have been thrown into an ecstasy by the note which Mrs. Fanshawe tossed to her. But now it was only a tepid kind of interest which she was capable of feeling in the subject.

‘Ah yes! I see,’ she said, glancing languidly over the missive. ‘Well, I am glad Lady Fitz-John has made herself polite at last.’

And then she handed it back, and tried to recall what Raymond had said about coming to the bazaar on Friday.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNEXPECTED SUMMONS.

NEXT morning, when the sunbeams shining through the light drapery of her window kissed away the sleep from Minna’s eyelids, it seemed to her that she was awaking into a new life fairer and brighter than any she had ever known. She was in the world still, but a spell appeared to have been laid upon it since her last awakening which made it look more like a region of fairyland than its common work-a-day self. Perhaps it was that she was yet under the impression of her dreams, and her dreams that night had been very pleasant.

She was more than usually pensive and abstracted at her toilet, musing a great deal with herself and getting on very slowly. But her meditation was not of a kind to leave any of the pale cast of thought on her cheeks, and when at last she entered the breakfast-room they were glowing as brightly and freshly as the morning itself. Mrs. Fanshawe thought that she had never seen her Minna look so well.

‘Good morning, dear child. Why, how late you are to-

day! Your papa has done breakfast this half-hour and gone off to finish the newspaper in his study. Which will you have this morning—tea or coffee? By the way, there's a letter for you somewhere—oh! here it is.'

'I can't think who it is from, I'm sure,' said Minna, scanning the superscription. 'I don't know the writing at all.'

'Nor I either, and I can't make out the postmark. Such a round funny little hand, isn't it?'

Minna opened the letter, her fingers trembling a little in consequence of a certain wild fancy which had crossed her brain for an instant. An absurdly wild fancy as she admitted to herself, for, other improbabilities apart, what could be more extravagant than the idea of Mr. Lee writing a hand which it was possible to characterise as round and funny?

'Well, dear, what is it?' asked Mrs. Fanshawe curiously. But Minna was too much engrossed to answer, and Mrs. Fanshawe, looking at her with some anxiety, saw that she had suddenly changed colour.

The letter she was reading ran as follows: —

*Black Moor Farm, Hollsworth,
Wednesday.*

MY DEAR MINNIE,

I hope you will excuse the liberty I am taking in writing to you, but as things have happened, I think it is my duty. I am sure you will be sorry to hear that dear father had a bad accident yesterday evening in nailing up the cherry-tree. The ladder slipped and he fell down and hurt his head, and has never properly come to himself since. I am glad to say the Doctor seems to think that he is only

stunned and may perhaps get well again, but I am very anxious and unhappy. What makes me trouble you is that two or three times he has put up his hands and cried 'Minnie;' it is the only word he has said since it happened. I have been very much puzzled what to do, and I have nobody to advise me, but I think it is only right that I should ask you to come and see him; it seems dreadful to let him call for anything in vain when he is so ill, and I am afraid he may be worse than the Doctor says. I hope you will come. I will get a bedroom ready for you so that you may stay near him till the danger is over, and will try to make everything as comfortable for you as possible, though of course very different from what you have been accustomed to. Please do come, and as soon as you can, for indeed he is very ill. I will now conclude, and begging you to excuse blots, for I am in great distress, believe me to be,

My dear Minnie,

Your affectionate sister,

AMY HAROLDSON.

P. S. I hope I have directed it right. I think I have heard you are called Miss Fanshawe now, so I suppose any other name would not find you.

Looking very pale, Minna silently passed this letter to Mrs. Fanshawe, who, knowing that something was wrong, received it in silence also, and read it in her turn. An uncomfortable pause followed, broken at last by the elder lady.

'My poor dear child! what a thing this is for you! What are you going to do about it?'

'I think I should like to go, mamma, if you please. I should not be long away, you know.'

Mrs. Fanshawe was in a dilemma. She was not hampered by any feeling of tenderness or compassion for John Haroldson; on the contrary, she was provoked with him for having presumed even in delirium to ask for Minna. But she was weak enough to feel a superstitious scruple about refusing what might prove to be the last wish of a dying man.

‘It’s very awkward—very awkward indeed. I don’t like to take the responsibility of advising, and yet You must do as you wish about it of course. Only I can’t help thinking your—this letter exaggerates the danger very much. In fact, for my own part, I don’t believe there is anything serious the matter.’

‘I hope not, mamma. But if there was, you know’

‘Oh yes! I quite understand your feelings, my dear, and I would not for an instant stand in the way of your doing what you think right. But it is a great pity it has happened, that’s all—a dreadful pity.’

‘Yes,’ said Minna sadly, ‘it is very dreadful. I remember him so well; he always noticed me a great deal, and I used to be very fond of him. It all comes back to me now so plainly! Poor father—I am very, very sorry.’

It was the first time for years that Minna had adverted to the fact that she had a father living other than Mrs. Fanshawe’s husband—much less said anything to show that she still held him in kindly remembrance. But Mrs. Fanshawe grudged poor John Haroldson even this, and it was with a well-defined though secret pang of jealousy that she answered:

‘Don’t fret, my darling, don’t fret. It is all very well to be sorry of course—one feels sorry for anybody under such circumstances—but you are our daughter now, remember,

mine and your papa's. There is nobody in the world who loves you or ever can love you—as a parent at least—half so well as we do, mind that.'

'Oh yes! I know,' said Minna, and she gave a little involuntary sigh.

'I am sure you do, dear child. He may have been very kind to you, I dare say—I have no doubt he was—but anybody may see he cannot have been so extraordinarily fond of you, or he would not have given you up.'

'Of course he would not, mamma. Oh! I have very often thought about that. But as I am actually sent for, I feel that it is my duty to go.'

'Perhaps it may be, my dear—for this once. It is not what I like—I may say it is not what I have a right to expect—that you should be interfered with in this way, but, as it has happened so, you must do as you think best yourself.'

'Thank you, mamma. Then I will go at once, please.'

'Very well. It is the safe side, of course, if anything was to happen. I could not bear to have you fretting yourself afterwards with thinking that you had the least thing to reproach yourself with. You will come away as soon as possible, I am sure? This afternoon, if you find him better?'

'Oh yes, mamma, as soon as ever I can.'

'Perhaps, though, it would be as well not to return to-day, after all,' continued Mrs. Fanshawe, pondering. 'Miss Chatterton said something about spending the afternoon with us, and if she was here when you came home you would be catechised to death about where you had been. I will make a proper excuse for you, and you can take the first train back to-morrow.'

‘Yes — if he is better. Oh! mamma, you will take care not to let Miss Chatterton or anybody else know where I am, won’t you?’ she added anxiously.

‘Of course, my dear; I will take good care. And let me see — it is lucky your papa has not gone to the counting-house yet — he shall escort you to the station and see you off, so that the servants shan’t get gossiping about the name of the place the ticket is taken for.’

‘I would not have anybody know for the world,’ said Minna, clasping her hands affrightedly. An idea had just occurred to her which threw her into a state of panic terror. What if Raymond Lee should find out that her father was not the rich Mr. Fanshawe, but a rough country farmer?

‘My poor pet, how frightened you look! It is very, very hard on you. But nobody shall hear of it — trust me for that.’

‘I do, mamma. But oh! I hope they won’t find out about me in some other way. I am afraid a great many people here know that I am not really your daughter, and I have just been thinking that perhaps they will get talking of it to — to people who don’t know it already, I mean. There is Mr. Lee, for instance, he evidently has no idea of such a thing, and it would be very cruel if he were told — he or any other new acquaintance, I mean; of course it would be all the same. But people are so spiteful, and I feel certain that that horrid Mrs. Vesey would do me an ill turn if she could. Oh! mamma, I am very silly, but I can’t help it.’

The last words were an apology for a great burst of tears which she could not restrain as she realised the idea of Raymond discovering the truth of her parentage. She had shed no tears over Amy’s note.

‘Hush, darling, hush,’ soothingly said Mrs. Fanshawe, her

womanly instinct perhaps divining something of the cause of this excessive emotion. 'She won't get an opportunity of telling him anything about you, and if she does there is no great harm done after all. Neither she nor anybody else has ever heard a word about your — your Hollsworth relations, thank goodness, and being my adopted daughter doesn't prove that you are not perfectly well connected, you know. Nobody could look at you, my beautiful pet, and take such a notion into their heads for an instant.'

'I am glad you think so, mamma,' said Minna, blushing through her tears. 'Only some people are so fond of blackening other people's characters'

She broke down again with a little sob.

'My dear love, don't alarm yourself. Mr. Lee is the last person living to be influenced by anybody's idle gossip, I should say. And let the worst come to the worst, I don't know if it would so very much signify if he was. He is not the only man in the world, my dear.'

'I was not thinking particularly about Mr. Lee,' said Minna, drying her eyes hastily. 'I only just mentioned him as an example.'

Oh! Minna!

'No, no, there are others,' went on Mrs. Fanshawe musingly, with no notice of the interruption. 'Be sure you don't stay a day longer away than you can help, Minna. Tomorrow won't be a bit too soon to begin thinking about your dress for the *fête*.'

'And there will be the bazaar too,' rejoined Minna dolefully. 'We promised to go the first day, and Mrs. Wilks will be so disappointed if we don't keep our word. Oh! I will be back as soon as I possibly can, you may depend upon it.'

‘You are sure you ought to go?’ said Mrs. Fanshawe dubiously. She thought she detected on Minna’s part symptoms of wavering which it might be well to encourage if it could be done without taking on herself the responsibility of direct dissuasion.

But if Minna had been in any danger of wavering, Mrs. Fanshawe’s question recalled her to a sense of duty at once.

‘Yes, mamma, I am sure I ought to go. I should feel myself very wicked if I did not.’

And, answering thus resolutely, she left the room without further delay to prepare for her journey.

CHAPTER VII.

THE OLD HOME.

EARLY in the afternoon of that same day, a pretty young lady dressed in the height of the fashion was seen walking by herself along the road which leads from Hollsworth to Black Moor Farm. The few passers-by who met her, consisting of some half-dozen carters and market-women, turned their heads to look at her with surprise, knowing that there was no one the least like her belonging to the neighbourhood. Their surprise would have been considerably increased could they have guessed that the fashionable stranger was Farmer Haroldson’s eldest daughter.

Minna indeed it was, who, with no need of asking her way, had unhesitatingly found and followed the road leading to her father’s house.

She had never traversed it since childhood, and yet now it seemed to her that she knew it better than any street in St. Austin’s. And with the sense of familiarity came a

strange yearning sense of liking and affection. She was glad to see the old place again, and to find it still unchanged, wondering at herself for having let those thousand pleasant memories so long lie dormant which now rushed back on her with every step she took. The Black Moor stretched before her bleak and barren in spite of the noon-day sun shining on it, but she heeded its bleakness and barrenness not. To her the weird landscape seemed smiling and companionable, and her heart swelled when she looked on it as though at sight of an old friend.

She was inclined for a moment to reproach herself for having been content to spend so many years away from her former home without revisiting it, but quieted her conscience with the reflection that, if she had been cared for there, she would not have been as it were thrust from it. As her words to her aunt that morning had implied, it was not the first time that this argument had comforted her. For, whatever her faults of frivolity or worldliness, she had not grown up to womanhood without occasionally casting a tender thought behind on the old scenes and times from which years were gradually dividing her further and further; and but for some such argument she might not have resigned herself so easily as she did to the futility of attempting a reconciliation between past and present.

She came at length in front of the farm-house, and paused at the well-remembered garden-gate which she had last passed through as a weeping child fifteen years before. She could have fancied herself a child again as she looked up at the unchanged physiognomy of the building. In presence of that familiar greystone front, with those eaves and gables every one of which she knew by heart, it was difficult to believe that all things were not, like them, still as they had

been. As one in a dream she lifted the latch and went up the little garden towards the open door, through which as she came nearer she caught a glimpse of the kitchen, with the sanded floor and raftered roof which her visions of home had always shown her. All was so much as she had known it that she half expected to find her mother busied there as of yore.

But now, within doors, presented itself the first sign of change. Instead of the gentle sweet-voiced mother whom she remembered so well, she found only a big slatternly-looking woman who had been hired in a hurry to do the house-work while Amy performed the office of sick-nurse.

‘You are the young lady what was expected, I s’pose, miss,’ said this personage before Minna had found voice to speak. ‘Then, please, you’re to wait in the parlour, and I ’ll run upstairs and tell Miss Amy. She ’ll be down directly, I dare say—she don’t mind leaving the master for a bit now that he’s come to himself. This way, miss. Better? Oh yes; the master’s much better to-day. He ’s got the turn now, you see, and after that folks is sure to do nicely.’

With which aphorism Minna found herself left alone in the neat little parlour which now, as in Mrs. Haroldson’s time, was reserved exclusively for occasions of state and ceremony.

How well she remembered it, to be sure!

There was the little mahogany chiffonier she used to think so grand—there the horse-hair sofa on which she had seen her mother sit reading on Sunday afternoons. There on the mantel-piece were the same ornaments which had adorned it fifteen years before—the pretty painted scent-bottles that would be handed down for her to smell at when she was good, the china lady and gentleman à la Louis

Quatorze whom she was allowed to consider as her property, and regarding whose imaginary history and antecedents she was always asking questions. She had been in terrible grief concerning one of those figures once, having by misadventure knocked off the lady's arm, but her mother had comforted her, kissing away her tears, and showing how the piece could be cemented on again so that the fracture would be hardly visible. Ah! what happy old times those were, and what a kind mother that dead mother of hers had been!

She was beginning to feel strangely affected by these memories, when suddenly a question occurred to her which drove them all out of her head and froze in their source the tears which were rising to her eyes. What would Mr. Lee think if he could see into that shabby little parlour, and guess that she had tender recollections connected with yonder paltry chiffonier and horse-hair sofa and those odiously vulgar mantel-piece ornaments? Her face glowed with shame and mortification at the mere idea.

Presently a light step was heard coming down stairs and along the passage, and Minna knew that she was about to see her sister. And curiously enough, the elegantly dressed town-bred young lady, accustomed to mix in society from her childhood up, without an iota of shyness, could not help paying the little country-girl the compliment of feeling a certain nervous trepidation at her approach. As the door opened to admit her sister, Minna felt her heart beat.

It was certainly no very formidable-looking person who appeared. A short plump figure demurely clad in a brown stuff dress, a round childish face (the nose slightly *retroussé*), with brown hair and eyes, and a complexion which malice, overlooking the healthy glow of the warm red blood

mantling underneath, might have called brown also—such were the figure and face of Minna's sister, as unlike Minna's own as could well be imagined. A less imposing aspect it would be difficult to conceive, and yet somehow there was something taking about it. For while the short figure was perfectly neat and well-proportioned, the round face looked temptingly soft and velvety, and the homely brown eyes when they were not shyly concealed by down-cast lids fringed with singularly long and silken lashes, shone (sparkling was quite out of their line) with a clear honest light very pleasant to behold.

A great deal more was visible just now of the lashes than of the eyes; their owner, in spite of her nineteen summers, pausing on the threshold in a state of such evident embarrassment that Minna felt obliged to give her a little encouragement.

‘How do you do, Amy? I am very glad to see you.’

She held out her hand, in which Amy, still looking very shy, came up and laid hers. And then Minna, suddenly resolving a moot point which she had been debating during the journey to no purpose, bent down her lips to the soft round face and kissed it. Decidedly it would not do not to kiss her own sister.

‘Dear Minnie!’ said Amy gratefully. She had hardly known whether or not to expect so distinguished a mark of favour.

‘Dear Amy!’ said Minna, pressing her sister's hand (another kiss would have seen carrying things too far).

There was an awkward pause, again broken by Minna.

‘I am glad to hear that my father is so much better.’

She had already decided that ‘my father’ was the proper phrase to be used in speaking of John Haroldson. ‘Papa’

was appropriated to Mr. Fanshawe, and 'father' was of course too vulgar to be thought of for a moment. She might have said 'our father,' to be sure, but considering that she knew so little of Amy, the expression would perhaps have been unnecessarily familiar.

'Yes,' said Amy, 'he is very much better. He came to himself last night as if he were waking up from sleep, and though the bruises are giving him a good deal of pain, I am not frightened about him any more now. I was dreadfully frightened yesterday, or of course I should never have thought of troubling you,' she added with a timid glance of apology from under the long eye-lashes.

'There is no harm done,' replied Minna graciously. 'I am very much pleased to have an opportunity of seeing you both again.'

'It is very, very kind of you. Would you mind waiting a few minutes while I go and tell father you are here? I did not like even to let him know that I had written to you in case there might be some disappointment. Please sit down.'

With these words the little brown figure vanished from the room, and Minna was left by herself to consider the impression which her sister had made upon her.

'What a nice little thing! And that is really my sister. My sister—how strange it sounds to have a sister! I wonder if she has learned the piano—not a note, I am afraid. But she has turned out very well, considering her disadvantages, poor girl. How I should like to know her! I am sure we should get on capitally—she is so sweet and good-tempered-looking, and I should be so kind to her. It makes one quite sorry to think of her having been so neglected. Oh dear! what a pleasure it would be to develope her and form her

manners—they *would* form, I feel certain. Well, perhaps some day'

The flow of her thoughts came to a sudden stop here. What would Mr. Lee think if he saw Amy before the process of formation was complete? She shook her head rather sadly as she admitted the impossibility that the nice little thing and herself could ever be more to each other than they were already.

Meanwhile the younger sister had gone upstairs to her father, intent on breaking to him the news of Minna's arrival. The task was one of some delicacy, for the pain of his bruises, complicated by a sharp touch of rheumatism which had treacherously taken that opportunity of attacking him, had made him yet more irritable and excitable than usual.

'Father,' she began timidly, creeping softly to his bedside, 'are you awake?'

The bedclothes tossed tumultuously at the question.

'Awake—I should think I was awake. Awake! yes, and likely to be awake for many a long hour to come, confound it. What do you mean by asking?'

'Only that I have something say to you, father dear. You know of course that for a long time after the accident you were very ill.'

'Yes, and I know I'm very ill still. What's the good of telling me that?'

'And lay for hours and hours almost as if you were dead,' persisted Amy. 'Except that every now and then you put up your hands and called for Minnie.'

'Called for *what*?'

Amy looked very much frightened.

'For Minnie,' she repeated tremulously.

‘Did I? More fool I then, that’s all. Now be quiet again if you can.’

‘But, father, I must explain it all to you, or you won’t understand. I didn’t know what to do when I heard you; you were so ill, and I was afraid something dreadful might be going to happen, and at last I made up my mind that—that—don’t be angry, father—that I would write to tell her of it.’

‘Write to *her*! And you did—did you? Then you’ve acted like an idiot. What do you think she cared whether I was ill or well, dead or alive? And I suppose she let you know pretty quick that it was nothing to her—eh? Or her compliments and to say she was sorry to hear the old man was making an ass of himself. Eh? eh? eh?’

He had raised himself on his elbow, and spoke with an angry vehemence which terrified her.

‘Oh no! father, no! How can you say these things?’

‘What did she do, then?’

‘She set out directly she had my letter,’ murmured Amy, without daring to look up.

‘Set out! Where from—where to—what for?’

‘To come here, father. And—and she is waiting downstairs just now.’

For an instant a thrill as of an electric shock quivered through John Haroldson’s whole frame. In the next he sank back on his pillow, weak and trembling with emotion.

‘Minnie—my little Minnie,’ he cried, hoarsely. ‘My Minnie come back to her old father! Quick—quick—what are you waiting for? Minnie—my little darling—how happy we shall be!’

He waved his shaking hand with a gesture of feverish impatience which Amy hastened to obey.

If Minna had been agitated at the prospect of meeting her sister, she was still more so when she was summoned to

appear before her father. Her heart beat faster than ever as she followed Amy up-stairs and entered with her the room where the sick man lay—the same where she remembered him lying when she parted from him last. She recognised it, and looked round with eyes before which a mist had suddenly arisen.

‘Minnie—my little Minnie,’ cried a feeble voice from behind the bed-curtain.

It was the voice of her father calling to her from the bed by which she had stood to bid him good-bye fifteen years ago. And at the same moment she saw the curtain drawn impatiently back and her father’s arms stretched forth to embrace her.

All the emotions of that far-distant time thronged back on her heart as she heard and saw. She forgot Mrs. Fanshawe, and Mrs. Fanshawe’s nice house, and Mrs. Fanshawe’s grand friends, forgot all that had passed since she had last left that room, and rushed to the bedside as eagerly as she would have rushed then if she had heard herself called back as she went weeping into exile. In another moment her arms were round her father’s neck, and—a child again—she was sobbing out the grief of fifteen years ago on his bosom.

CHAPTER VIII.

DISENCHANTMENT.

IT was long before she raised her head from his shoulder (she had forgotten all about the pretty Paris bonnet which she was crushing unmercifully out of shape), and, when she did, it was only to gaze with a fresh burst of tears on his familiar sun-burned face—so familiar that she scarcely

noticed the sun-burning. And in his turn he gazed back on hers hardly knowing that it was beautiful; he saw nothing of it save that it was his child's, and that it was looking at him kindly.

‘Minnie—little Minnie—so you have come back to me at last? You love your poor old father after all.’

She took his hand in both hers, and raised it fondly to her lips, not even then discovering that it was rough and horny.

‘Father—dear, dear father.’

‘My little darling child! How happy we shall be!’

The hearts of both were full, and a long silence followed, during which he lay looking at her as she stood by his bedside, his eyes overflowing with loving tenderness. At last he spoke, caressing the hand which he held clasped in his.

‘You must forgive me, Minnie dear—I shall not be happy till you have forgiven me.’

‘Forgive you! Dear father, there is nothing to forgive. Everything has been for the best.’

She thought he was going to excuse himself for having given her up to her aunt.

‘I see now how hardly I have judged you, though God knows such a one as I can have no right to be hard on any one’ (his voice nearly broke down here). ‘But I was always passionate and headstrong, Minnie, and when I found you were not coming back to us, it hurt me so that I seemed to hate you for it. You will forgive me, won’t you?’

She was very much surprised, but said nothing, and in answer to his appealing look pressed his hand warmly.

‘You have come back to me, and it is all over now like a horrible dream, and yet I can’t help speaking of it. Yes,

you may forgive me, dear, for I quite understand how unreasonable I have been. Little folks are made to like change and fine things, and you were such a little one then, Minnie! It was only nature you should take to your aunt when you were sent to live with her; it wouldn't have been nature any other way. I was the one to blame first of all, for letting you go; but we were so poor, and though I could have borne the poverty for myself, I couldn't for you, my darling. It was for your sake, Minnie dear, or I'd sooner have cut my right hand off.'

'Dear father! Oh yes! I ought to have thought of that before—I have been to blame too. But now that I know you really care to see me, it shall be quite different. I will come to visit you very often—it will be a great happiness.'

She had expected that the prospect would please him as much as it did herself, but to her surprise his countenance suddenly fell.

'Visit — what do you mean? You are going away then?'

'I am sorry I cannot stay longer this time. But I promised mam—Aunt Fanshawe—to be back by the first train to-morrow; we have a particular engagement for the afternoon.'

She felt the hand which he had been holding hitherto abruptly released.

'It is a great pity,' she stammered. 'But really I cannot help it.'

'No, no, it was all my mistake—all my mistake.' He burst into a harsh laugh, and added: 'Only think what an idiot I've been and made of myself! When I heard you were downstairs, I was goose enough to take it into my head you had come to stay with me always. I thought you had found out that blood was thicker

than water, maybe. Ha! ha! did you ever hear of such an old greenhorn?’

She felt very much hurt and shocked, and none the less so that for the first time her ear detected the strong country accent with which he spoke; so strong it was that she could not understand how she had not noticed it sooner.

‘It grieves me very much that you should be disappointed, father, but I do not think it is my fault. If you will only consider a little, I am sure you will see that I could not be expected to give up my home where I have always been so happy’

‘Of course I see you could not be expected. Why, I might as well expect to find a heart in the inside of a pebble as to find a fashionable lady liking her old father better than her balls and parties and fine dresses. I don’t know how I came to pitch on such a notion, I’m sure, but you see I’ve been ill, and that has made my head weak, I suppose. Ha! ha! ha! it was a good ’un, wasn’t it?’

A good ’un! And the phrase was not used jocularly—he was too terribly earnest in his irony for that. If Mr. Lee had been there to hear!

‘I am sorry you think I deserve this, father. But you said yourself just now that it would have been unnatural of me not to love my aunt when she was so kind, and I think it would—unnatural and ungrateful.’

‘Well, and I don’t say different now, do I? I am only amused at myself for being such an old buzzard. Leave the glasses alone, can’t you, and don’t be making such a confounded clatter.’

The last words, spoken very sharply, were addressed to Amy, as she was taking down a medicine-bottle and wine-glass from the mantel-piece.

‘I was going to give you your afternoon drops, father—I ought to have thought of it before.’

‘Why didn’t you think of it before, then? You’d have thought of it before, I warrant, if you’d been in half the pain I’ve been lying in all morning. But you may put it back again, I won’t touch it. I’ve been dosed enough already, and dang me if I’ll stand any more of it. Put it down, do you hear?’

He spoke so fiercely that his poor little nurse dared not expostulate, and laid down the phial in evident trepidation. Minna saw her frightened look, and could not help inwardly resenting the tyranny and injustice which had called it forth. She knew that she herself had been the exciting cause of this overflow of wrath, and magnanimously interposed to divert it if possible from Amy.

‘I see you are offended with me, father. But really I do not know what I have done.’

‘Offended! Oh! dear no—not at all. How should I be offended? Would you mind taking away your hand—I can’t bear to have anybody’s hand sprawling about on my bed-clothes.’

She drew her hand back as quickly as if she had been stung.

‘And perhaps you’ll be kind enough to sit down and not stand staring at me like that. It’s bad enough to have the rheumatics jobbing like pen-knives first at one joint and then at another without being stared at.’

She sat down without speaking, and immediately became absorbed in the task of smoothing out the creases which she discovered to have been made in her new silk skirt while she had been bending over her father’s pillow. But the promptness of her obedience failed to soothe the sick man’s irritation.

‘If you think I ought to take physic you ’d better give it me,’ he said to Amy testily. ‘Ugh! if you only felt what I’m feeling now you’d have a sharper memory perhaps.’

‘I will get it directly. I am so sorry for you, father dear.’

‘Come and put my pillow straight, will you? Not that way—I never knew such awkward hands as you’ve got to-day. What’s that confounded swishing noise? I wish to Heaven it would stop, or I shall be in a fever with it.’

Minna took the hint directly, and left the creases to themselves. But even this did not pacify him.

‘Oh! it was you, was it? I hate silk frocks. Now then, Amy, am I to have any doctor’s stuff or am I not? You leave me to think of everything for myself.’

Poor Amy, who had been called in a hurry to adjust her father’s pillow, hastened back to the task of preparing the medicine, sadly bewildered by the difficulty of pleasing him.

‘Now then, what are you staring about for? Can’t you give me the physic and have done with it?’

‘I was looking for the spoon to measure it with, father. I thought I saw it just now.’

‘Well done, you’re the slowest coach that ever I came across.’

‘There is one on the mantel-piece,’ put in Minna quickly. And glad to have an opportunity of serving her poor frightened-looking little sister, she rose to fetch it herself.

The act was performed with the best intentions, but was attended with very undesirable results. In coming away from the mantel-piece, Minna’s long dress caught in the fire-irons, and brought them clattering down with a noise which made her look very penitent and set the invalid’s nerves all on edge.

‘What the devil?’ he cried angrily. ‘That confounded frock again! And bless my heart see there—it’s a yard too long. Why can’t you wear clothes like other people? Look at Amy, she don’t drag a tail after her.’

Minna’s penitence had all evaporated now. She glanced at Amy’s dress with an expression which she did not intend to be disdainful but which was so nevertheless, and answered coldly:

‘It is the fashion for dresses to be worn long. I cannot help it.’

‘Then it’s a beastly bad fashion, that’s all I’ve got to say. And as ugly as sin.’

‘I am sorry you think so. I rather like it myself.’

She ought not to have said this, but it was a little spurt of temper which she could not restrain.

‘That’s lucky, for I suppose you would not dress out of the fashion to save your life and your soul too. Oh! this is the physic, is it? Give it here then, you’ve been long enough making it. Amy, if ever you wear a frock like that, I’ll never forgive you.’

Minna felt very much offended, and hardly attempted to make a secret of it.

‘I am disturbing you, I am afraid,’ she said with dignity. ‘Perhaps I had better go down-stairs.’

‘Yes, yes, go downstairs as soon as you like both of you. I should have been asleep an hour ago if I had been let alone. No, no, Amy, you needn’t stay. I’ve had enough of company for to-day. Let me be—I want to go to sleep.’

The sisters looked at each other, and silently went out together. The room was as quiet now as John Haroldson would wish it, but, quiet as it was, he did not sleep.

CHAPTER IX.

DROPPED IN TO TEA.

MINNA had been accustomed all her life to be humoured and indulged, and the sense of injury with which she left her father's presence was stronger than perhaps it ought to have been. She was wounded and angry—so angry that, had it not been for her dread of confronting the curiosity of Miss Chatterton, she would have left the house at once with a determination never to re-enter it. As it was, she resigned herself to accept the shelter of its roof till the next morning, but with an unwillingness which was manifest to Amy even in the midst of her hospitable cares.

The poor little thing was dreadfully vexed, and tried hard to make excuses.

‘He is so ill to-day, you know, poor dear—you mustn’t mind him,’ she pleaded. ‘Oh! when he is well he is quite different.’

‘I am glad to hear it. I should be sorry to think that you were always liable to be treated as unjustly as I have been to-day.’

‘Oh! but he didn’t mean half what he said, I’m sure. You must forget it—indeed, indeed you must.’

‘When people have been used as I was used just now, they are not always able to forget it,’ said Minna, with more solemnity than was perhaps necessary, for her dignity was in arms. ‘My feelings have been very much hurt.’

‘I am so sorry, it was all my fault, you know; I ought to have seen he wasn’t fit to bear the excitement, and I do feel that I am very much to blame for having exposed you to—

to anything so painful. I can only say that I am sorry—very, very sorry.'

The intensity of her little sister's penitence was an appeal to Minna's innate good-nature which it was not able to resist. She remembered that after all Amy had done nothing to offend her, and felt a magnanimous impulse to comfort and re-assure the poor girl.

'Never mind, Amy. You did everything for the best, I know. However hurt I may be, I am not so unreasonable but that I quite understand that. Now let us talk of something more agreeable. I am very glad to see you, my dear—very glad indeed, I can assure you. Do you remember me at all?'

'Yes, I remember a great deal about you,' answered Amy shyly.

'That's right. I remember you very plainly. You were such a nice round little thing, and so good-tempered. And I'm afraid I used to try your temper a good deal.'

'Did you?' said Amy, all on fire with blushes, 'I forget that.'

'Not purposely, you know, but I am sure I must have been a dreadful torment to you; elder sisters always are, I suppose. I remember once muffling you up till there was only the tip of your nose to be seen, that you might look like a sick old woman while I was the doctor.'

'I think I remember something about it. And you had father's hat on, had you not?'

'What a capital memory you have!' cried Minna, warming with the subject. 'Of course I had, and it was always slipping over my eyes and I was always pushing it up again. Oh dear! the longer I am here the more I seem to recollect it all. And do you remember playing at soldiers, and

making ourselves a tent in the garden with a sheet and a couple of towel-horses? I was captain of course, and a very tyrannical one, I have no doubt. And do you remember'...

Et cetera, et cetera.

It was wonderful what a fruitful topic these reminiscences proved, and how quickly it put the two sisters on friendly terms with each other in spite of the younger one's shyness. The afternoon hours were whiled away with astonishing rapidity, the pleasant *tête-à-tête* talk being only interrupted occasionally when Amy went upstairs to see if her father had need of her. These visits did not detain her long, for the invalid was so gruffly emphatic in declaring that he wanted nothing except to be left alone that she was only too glad to beat a retreat.

But evening came, and with it a rude ending of Minna's enjoyment.

The sisters had just sat down to tea, and Minna was getting more confidentially disposed than ever in the soft evening twilight, when a step was heard on the gravel without, followed by a drumming of knuckles against the outer door.

'It is Captain Pullyn!' cried Amy joyfully, in answer to her sister's surprised look. 'He always comes like that.'

She rose eagerly and hurried into the passage to admit the visitor. Minna looked after her with dignified surprise; opening the house-door was manifestly the duty of the woman in the kitchen.

The duty was performed by Amy nevertheless, and immediately afterwards Minna heard a heavy footstep scuffling in the passage, and a boisterous bass voice demanding:

'Well, lass, and how's father getting on?'

‘About the same since morning,’ Amy made answer. And then she whispered something about ‘Minnie’ being in the parlour which elicited an exclamation of surprise from the new-comer, and made Minna’s brows contract very visibly. What business had Amy to speak of her by her Christian name to a great coarse sailor with scuffling feet who called a young lady (or the sister of a young lady) ‘lass’? But she was considerably more shocked presently when the parlour-door was thrown open, and the owner of the scuffling feet actually made his appearance in her presence. It seemed that the man was positively going to join them at tea! Really it was too bad. She knew that she had often sat at the same table with him in by-gone days (indeed she had horrid visions of having sat on his knee), but things were very different now. Besides, he was so much more vulgar than she had had any idea of then! Surely he must have changed very much.

She had hardly had time to make this reflection when to her horror she discovered that he was advancing towards her with both hands extended.

‘Hollo, Minnie! is this really little Minnie? Here’s a sight for sore eyes if ever there was one. Bless your heart, my little lass, I’m as pleased to see you as land after a twelve-months’ cruise.’

She had no choice but to put out her hand, which she did very daintily and gingerly. He grasped it with such rude energy as almost to crush the delicate fingers, and then, still holding it, stood looking at her for a few seconds with an air of irresolution which, if such an idea had not seemed too incredibly absurd to be entertained for an instant, would have made her believe that he was thinking of kissing her. She could not seriously give him credit for contemplating

such an enormity, but felt frightened and angry notwithstanding, and pulled away her hand with an abruptness which appeared to give him some surprise. He recovered in a moment, however, and put a chair for himself at the table next to hers with immovable good-humour.

‘Ah! very well, very well, it’s what we old folks have to look out for. You don’t remember me after all these years, I dare say.’

‘Very little, I confess,’ said Minna, frigidly.

What an atrocious thing it was that she should be expected to associate with this common sea-faring creature! Her father was her father, and her sister was her sister, but what earthly claim had this vulgar leviathan of the deep to her consideration?

‘Oh! you do a little, do you? Well, so you ought, for you and I was fast friends once, reg’lar consort crafts. And I’ve always stuck by you, little Minnie—ay that I have, and fought your battles for you when you’ve been far enough from thinking of the poor old cap’en. For a ship will go as she’s steered, and so will a younker, and if either of ’em gets out of their course it’s the fault of them as keeps the log. That’s my point of view, and being so I ’ve always said that you was to pity and not to blame, and say it I always will if I live a thousand years. I’ve felt for you, little Minnie, if nobody else has.’

Felt for her indeed! What an odious man! And how fearfully he had made the room smell of tobacco! Minna was too much displeased to vouchsafe an answer—displeased not only with the captain himself, but with Amy, who, in evident unconsciousness of his demerits, had lit the candles in his honour and was complacently pouring him out a

breakfast-cupful of tea as for a welcome and privileged visitor.

Perhaps the captain perceived that his advances were not responded to, for his next words were addressed to the younger sister.

'I wonder what wind is keeping Joe. This is an early evening with him at the counting-house, and he don't stop away when he can help it, I know that.'

Here the captain closed one eye by way of preparation for a noisy sip of his tea, and this time Amy appeared to discover the vulgarity of his manners, for she made no answer and slightly coloured.

'It's my son,' said the captain, turning towards Minna to explain. 'He's a neighbour of yours, is Joe; that is, he lives at St. Austin's when he's at home, more's the pity, but he makes a run across once or twice a-week when he gets away early enough. He's a clerk with Brown Brothers and—Hollo! that's him.'

A gentle ring sounded at the door-bell, and again Amy rose to answer the summons, leaving the captain to entertain Minna by telling her how capitally well Joe was doing. Minna was polite enough to answer the man with a remark that it must be very gratifying, but was inwardly chafing at being left alone with him. It seemed to her that Amy was never coming back. And certainly Amy was longer away on this occasion than on the former one.

At last she returned, looking a little flurried by the increasing cares of hostess-ship, and followed by a stalwart young man, muscular and large-limbed, but withal so rosy-faced and smelling so strongly of pomatum that nobody could be in his company without feeling confidence in his entire harmlessness.

He was evidently dressed in his best, and the result was a general glossiness which contributed still further to the inoffensiveness of his aspect. His shirt-front was expansive and very highly glazed; his waistcoat, across which meandered a chain of brightly burnished yellow metal, was of the shiniest black satin; his boots were so well polished that you could almost have seen yourself in them; his hair was lustrous with the pomatum aforesaid; his very face was radiant, partly with natural good-humour, but also perhaps with recently applied soap. The splendour of his appearance was slightly marred for the first few moments by three or four parcels which he carried as he entered, and which he evidently did not quite know how to get rid of.

‘It is a pot of calves’-foot jelly for Mr. Haroldson,’ he explained, blushing. ‘And—and a few oranges and macaroons that I thought might be tasty for him. Shall I put them down here? I beg your pardon, miss.’

The last words were addressed with an embarrassed bow to Minna, as an apology for having been so long without noticing her. She returned the greeting with the slightest possible inclination of the head. She was afraid that this dreadful young man might try to claim acquaintance with her at St. Austin’s, and was determined to keep him at a proper distance.

‘Aha! we’ve got a visitor, you see, Joe,’ said the captain, with his horrid obtrusive joviality. ‘Who do you think it is? Who do you think it is?’

‘Amy—Miss Amy—told me,’ said Joe, stammering in evident awe of the elegant stranger. ‘Very glad to see you, miss, I’m sure.’

Minna answered by another inclination of the head. She was thinking that if Amy had had common sense and right

feeling, this would not have happened. Why could not the servant, or charwoman, or whatever she was, have been instructed to say 'Not at home' for that evening?

There was rather an awkward hiatus in the conversation, during which Minna felt the captain's eyes observantly fixed on her. She was afraid that he was going to make her another of his odiously familiar speeches, and was glad when he turned to his son and asked:

'Well, Joe, any news this evening?'

And this time there was no obtrusive joviality in his voice, but rather a slight, almost imperceptible, tone of sadness.

'Nothing particular, thank you,' said Joe, nervously twitching at the corner of the bag of oranges which he had deposited on the table. He was still standing, being apparently at a hopeless loss to know how he should dispose of himself.

'Won't you sit down?' said Amy, discovering his embarrassment and looking up at him shyly.

'Thank you, I will,' and Joe, much relieved, dropped down into a vacant chair by the little hostess's side, with a deprecating glance, however, directed to Minna first off all. It was very plain that he regarded her as a wet blanket.

'It was so very kind of you to think of bringing these things for father,' said Amy in her low sweet voice.

'Nonsense,' said Joe, in rather a low voice also. And as Joe spoke he smiled—perhaps to neutralise the apparent discourtesy of the word—and Amy, happening to catch his eye, smiled too. Minna noticed this bit of by-play, and thought it very unbecoming.

'You will take a cup of tea?' asked Amy, recovering herself.

‘Yes. please—if you can spare it,’ said Joe, recovering himself likewise.

‘Joe never refuses a cup of tea here,’ put in the captain.

At which Joe giggled unmeaningly, and Amy smiled again, though what there was to smile at Minna could not for the life of her make out.

Amy poured out a cup for Joe, and handed the captain his second; and then came a long uncomfortable interval during which everybody was stirring his or her tea and no word was said. Minna was too proud, and Joe and Amy too shy, for conversation; while Captain Pullyn, though neither proud nor shy, was unwontedly non-hilarious since he had given up trying to draw out Minna.

‘Fine day this has been,’ he remarked at last, by way of endeavouring to cheer up. It was not often that the captain found himself reduced to so common-place a topic as the weather, but the difficulty of making conversation on the present occasion was probably too much for him.

‘Beautiful,’ assented Joe. Then, gathering courage, he ventured on an original remark to the effect that the days were beginning to lengthen out famously.

‘I am so fond of the long days,’ murmured Amy.

‘But every season has its pleasures,’ observed Joe.

‘Leastways for young folks like you and Amy,’ said the captain.

Again they both tittered in unison, to Minna’s extreme scandal.

‘You really do like warm weather best, though, don’t you, Amy?’ demanded Joe earnestly—‘don’t you, Miss Amy, I mean?’

Here was the second time that this horrid young man had called Amy by her Christian name. Each time, indeed,

a slip of the tongue had apparently been committed, but the fact that such slips of the tongue were possible showed that there must have been on Amy's part a sad want of dignity.

'I think I do,' said Amy in answer to Joe's question.

'That shows a warm climate would be the very thing for you,' said Joe in an under-tone, not low enough, however, to escape Minna's perplexed ears. Neither did it escape Minna's eyes that Amy shook her head slightly and immediately became very red.

'You will take another cup, won't you, captain?' said Amy, turning from Joe rather abruptly.

But in strange contradiction to his wont the captain declined the offer. Apparently he was no longer able to bear up against the depressing influence of Minna's stateliness, for, after twiddling a few moments thoughtfully with his teaspoon, he pushed away his chair from the table and rose to take his departure.

'Good-bye, Amy lass, I'll come again to-morrow. You can tell your father I'm glad he's better.'

It was quite in opposition to the captain's habits to leave his friend's house so early when he was once installed in it; but, perhaps for the same reason that he chose to go, Amy did not seek to detain him.

Joe rose also, though more hesitatingly than his father, and made an awkward bow to Minna by way of leave-taking. She acknowledged it with another of her frigid inclinations of the head, and was preparing to bow off the captain in a similar manner, when to her surprise, the old man came up and took her hand before she knew what he was about.

'Good-bye, Minnie, I may never see you again p'raps,

but while I'm alive, I'm always your friend if you want one. God bless you, poor child, and take care of you.'

Minna was a little touched by the old sailor's persistent friendship, in spite of the strange compassionateness of look and voice with which the last words were uttered, and which she thought uncalled-for in the extreme. But before she had found anything to answer, he had passed out of the room, and Joe after him.

Amy followed with a light to show the visitors out. Perhaps it was because Minna was in an impatient mood, but it again seemed to her that Amy stayed away rather long, certainly longer than was absolutely necessary for merely shaking hands and saying 'Good night.'

CHAPTER X.

AMY'S TROUBLE.

'WHAT vulgar people those are!' remarked Minna, when at last Amy had returned to her, and the two sisters found themselves alone again.

The speech was unkind as well as rude, for Minna knew perfectly that, whatever might be the deficiencies of the captain and his son, Amy was not cognisant of them. But Minna was not in a kind mood just now, or perhaps she thought that true kindness consisted in opening her sister's eyes to what was what.

Amy crimsoned suddenly, and held her head very low as she answered in a pained, subdued voice:

'They are very old friends. And have always been exceedingly kind to us.'

‘Oh! I have no doubt they are worthy people enough. It is only a pity they should be so dreadfully common.’

Amy said nothing, and Minna paused a few moments in uncertainty as to whether or not she should pursue the subject. She knew that what she was thinking or saying might hurt Amy’s feelings; but the question was, would it not be her duty to say it? The consciousness of her own infinitely superior wisdom and knowledge of the world inspired her with a sense of almost maternal responsibility towards this ignorant inexperienced young thing who had grown up with nobody to take care of her or give her counsel. As usual in such cases of hesitation, the spirit of exhortation prevailed, and, as delicately as possible, she began:

‘Amy, dear, I hope you will excuse what I am going to say, but I am your sister, you know, and have perhaps a right to advise you. I was rather vexed, dear, just now to notice that young man calling you by your Christian name, and—and sitting next you, and laughing, and all that kind of thing. I think you had better be a little more distant with him for the future, for I am sure you must see that he is very vulgar, and if you let him go on in that way people may take it into their heads that—that you like him, in fact, or he may think so himself for that matter; young men are so conceited. It is not everybody who knows he is such an old friend, you see, dear, and I’m sure you would not like it to get about that—that there was anything between you and him.’

In considerate regard for her sister’s feelings, Minna had delivered this sage matronly counsel with eyes demurely cast down, but, receiving no answer, she ventured at last to lift them. Amy was sitting with her face turned aside, but her neck and so much of her cheek as was visible were glowing like heated coals. At the sight an idea that had never

yet occurred to her flashed across Minna's mind, startling her very considerably. Could it be that there really *was* something between them? She looked again; it seemed to her that Amy was trembling.

'Amy!' she cried, seized with sudden penitence. 'Dear Amy, I am afraid that without meaning it I have been very rude to you.'

'No, no,' said Amy, slipping her little hand into that which Minna held out to her. 'It was kind of you—very kind, dear Minnie. Only' . . .

She put her other hand before her eyes, and turned away her burning face yet further.

'Only what, dear? Is he really anything to you then?'

Amy made no answer, but Minna felt the little hand shaking in hers, and knew that it was as she had guessed.

She was somewhat shocked at the discovery, there is no denying; but remorse at having wounded the feelings of one so incapable of retaliating in kind made her more disposed to indulgence than she might otherwise have been. After all, she argued with herself, the attachment was not so very unsuitable. It was not to be expected that Amy's ideas should be as hers, and Joe was doubtless a very excellent young man for his station in life. And, having come to this conclusion, she gave full way to her sisterly tenderness for Amy and the irrepressible feminine interest in a love affair.

'Dear Amy! My dear sister! Don't be afraid of telling me, dear. And has he spoken to you about it? Is anything settled? Does my father know?'

Amy bowed her head very low, and whispered:

'Of course we told father at once. We—we are engaged, you know.'

Engaged! The edge of Minna's sentimental interest in her sister's love was a little blunted by hearing that its course had run so smoothly. Joe as the object of a romantic and perhaps unhappy attachment of which she should be the confidante was rather interesting than otherwise; but Joe as her brother-in-law was not interesting at all, and horribly undesirable. But for Amy's sake she strove to be as sympathising as she could.

'Indeed! I had no idea. Well, dear, I do most sincerely trust that you may be very, very happy. And when is it to be? You must be sure to let me know, for I should not wish such an event to take place without sending you some little token of my remembrance and good wishes.'

She determined she would do something very handsome for the young couple—give them a twenty-pound note, perhaps, to begin house-keeping with; in their station money would doubtless be more acceptable than money's worth.

'You are very good,' said Amy in a low trembling voice. 'But—but—it will not be for a long time. He is going out to Ceylon first, and will be years and years away.'

'My poor girl!' cried Minna with a new accession of sympathy. 'Going to Ceylon—how is that?'

'Brown Brothers have got another house in Ceylon,' said Amy simply, relating the fact as though it had been the most pathetic in the world. 'All the clerks are sent out there in turn that they may learn everything about the business, and his turn comes next summer. Of course we ought to think it a very good thing, for he'll have a great rise, and he gets very little here, not nearly enough to—to keep more than himself on, or he wouldn't go. But it seems dreadful to part for so long.'

Having once broken the ice, the poor girl was getting

quite confidential under the influence of Minna's encouraging kindness.

'It is a great pity,' condoled Minna, on her part a good deal moved by her sister's increasing frankness. 'But why can't you go out with him, dear?'

Why not indeed? And they might like Ceylon so much, and get on so nicely, that they might wish to stay there always; and the awkward question of the vulgar brother-in-law would be quite disposed of.

'That's just what he wants,' said Amy, plucking nervously at her apron. 'Oh! he has talked to me about it till I have been quite miserable. But I think he understands now it is no good.'

'But why, Amy dear, why? I should have thought it was the very thing.'

'Father's got nobody but me to take care of him,' answered Amy with sudden firmness. 'It wouldn't suit him to live out of England at his time of life, and I'll never go away to leave him alone, never.'

'Oh! I see. Dear Amy, how good you are! Well, I can only hope that some day you may reap the reward of it all, and that young Mr. Pullyn may come back in due time as prosperous and well-to-do as you can wish.'

'Thank you—I hope so,' said Amy, plucking at her apron again. 'But nobody knows what may happen, and sometimes I think . . . Oh! dear Minnie, don't be angry with me' (the poor little thing here put up her apron and sobbed behind it). 'He is to be away so long, you know, and sometimes I think that perhaps—perhaps it will never be at all.'

Minna was deeply touched, and, taking her little sister in her arms, comforted her very kindly. Perhaps her consola-

tion was given a little too much in the tone of a fond parent soothing a child for the breakage of a doll or for some other imaginary sorrow; and certainly the prospect of not marrying Joe could hardly be supposed to look a serious calamity in Minna's eyes. But Amy felt the kindness a great deal more than the superciliousness, and was very grateful indeed. It was a real luxury for her to have some one to whom she might without indiscretion confide her griefs and fears and all the thousand little secrets of her loving heart—no less real a luxury than it was for Minna to find some one to soothe, caress, and shed tears with. Neither of the girls had ever had a confidante before, and the pleasure was enhanced by its novelty.

That evening made the two sisters very intimate. They sat together far into the night giving and receiving confidences; and, when at last they parted on the threshold of Minna's bed-chamber, it was with a strong impression on each side that it was very nice to have a sister.

CHAPTER XI.

CONVERSION OF OLD-CLOTHESMEN.

BUT however pleasant the sisters found each other's society, fate seemed to have willed it that their paths in life should be separate, and in the morning it was time for Minna to go. She took leave of her father and of her sister with very different feelings. The former she saw as a matter of ceremony for a few minutes before going away; but he was still cross and irritable as on the previous day, expressing neither regret at her departure nor desire for her return, and altogether behaving so churlishly that she was

glad to get out of his room before any high words had been spoken.

But from Amy she did not part without real regret and a very sincere wish to see more of her.

‘It is impossible I should ever come here again under the circumstances,’ she said a little bitterly; ‘you perceive yourself how unwelcome I should be. But if you ever happen to be over at St. Austin’s, Amy dear, I shall be so glad if you will give me a call. Mamma—Aunt Fanshawe that is—is so kind; she will not object, I am sure. You will try to come, won’t you, dear?’

‘I should like to see you, of course,’ said Amy, nervously. ‘Only it would make me feel so odd calling all by myself at such a fine house, and’ . . .

‘Nonsense, silly child, what is there to be afraid of? You won’t see anybody but me, you know; I ’ll take care of that.’

The last words were spoken with some energy as she conjured up the possibility of Amy being seen by any one on the Fanshawe visiting list. Yes indeed, she would take care, and good care too.

‘You shall be shown straight into my boudoir. I will give orders to the servants, so that there shall be no mistake. You will ask for Miss Fanshawe, remember, and you need not kiss me until we are alone and the door is shut; I should not like—I mean Aunt Fanshawe does not wish it known that I have any other relations. You understand, dear?’

‘Yes, I quite understand,’ said Amy, holding down her head.

‘That reminds me, I hope young Mr. Pullyn will be careful not to say anything about me. You had better warn him, I think. Things come round so, you see, and though it isn’t likely he knows anybody personally who knows me’ (no

indeed, nothing could be more wildly improbable, she thought, with an unconscious toss of the head), 'one cannot be too cautious. You quite see that, don't you?'

'Oh yes, quite; but Joe will be very careful, I am sure.'

'I am sure of it, too. And now, good-bye, my dear sweet little sister. It is settled then that you are to come and see me?'

'I will try,' said Amy, as she returned her sister's kiss.

It doubtless argued a great want of proper spirit to make such a promise, but poor Amy had no proper spirit—only a soft loving little heart.

With this understanding, and many embraces and endearments, the girls parted, and Minna took the way towards home, full of tender thoughts of her newly discovered sister.

Gradually, however, as she drew near her journey's end, these thoughts, like the outlines of a dissolving view in the act of change, became more and more broken and disjointed, and at last were supplanted altogether by a new set of mental images. She was going *from* Amy and Hollsworth, she was going *to* the bazaar in St. Cecilia's Hall and the possibility of meeting Raymond Lee; and naturally enough her meditations travelled in the same direction. By the time she reached her aunt's house her mind was busied very much as it would have been if no such person as Amy had existed — with speculations as to the likelihood of Mr. Lee being at the bazaar, as to what he would say to her if he were, as to what his presence there would prove, and also as to what it was most expedient that she should wear for the occasion.

Her aunt did not trouble her much with questions as to her Hollsworth experiences, instinctively feeling, perhaps, that the subject was too delicate for discussion; so that

even when arrived at home, Minna was able to give herself up to the natural course of her reflections with very little interruption. When at last the fashionable hour came for going out, and Mrs. Fanshawe's grand carriage drove off in the direction of St. Cecilia's Hall, the feelings of one of its occupants were wrought up to a high pitch of excitement and expectation.

The Bazaar in Aid of the Conversion of Old-Clothesmen in the Metropolis Fund had long been looked forward to by the fashionable world of St. Austin's as one of the great events of that year's season; and certainly the combination of sights and sounds which St. Cecilia's Hall presented as Mrs. and Miss Fanshawe now entered it was calculated to justify the anticipations of the most sanguine.

There were strains of music, and streaming scarlet banners with white mottoes, and many-coloured stalls piled with gay nicknacks, and in the vacant spaces a slowly perambulating mass of silks and muslins and bright ribbons, with here and there a foil of black broadcloth. There were rich draperies that rustled with every movement of their wearers, and the murmur of low-voiced flirtations, and smirks and nods and handshakings, and exclamation, and bright young faces, and old ones made up to look their best, and sweet commingling of perfumes that came and went in faint breaths, and everybody declaring that the bazaar was a great success.

Minna made the remark also as she moved down the middle of the hall with Mrs. Fanshawe, but somehow she did not feel quite sure about it. The place was swarming with visitors—she saw that; and yet it made an impression on her as of comparative emptiness and solitude. The music, the decorations, the company, the amateur saleswomen and

their counters—all were of first-rate quality and get-up; still she had a feeling that there was a deficiency somewhere, though what it was exactly that was wanting she did not know. She knew very well, however, that she did not see Mr. Lee. Perhaps he was not coming at all.

‘Miss Fanshawe,’ said a rich full-toned voice behind her.

She had not heard that voice often, but she knew it instantly. She turned and saw Mr. Lee standing at her side, and all at once the scene around her became invested with dazzling splendour. The success of the bazaar was past a doubt.

‘How do you do? Mamma, here is Mr. Lee.’

It was all she could say in the confusion of finding herself so suddenly accosted, and even these few words were spoken with a certain quivering of the voice which she could only hope would not be observed by anybody but herself. And yet the agitation of the moment did not deprive her of the power of drawing logical conclusions

‘He must care for me, or he would never have come here after what he said about bazaars.’

As she thought thus, a sense of wild elation came over her, and the notes of the fashionable waltz played by the band sounded like strains from fairyland.

Minna might have been more elated still could she have guessed the intensity of distaste for society and its shams which Raymond had to overcome in visiting St. Cecilia’s Hall that day. He was so altogether unaccustomed to the kind of thing he saw there that he was as much disgusted with it as a Hindoo with a European dancing-party. He took life too seriously to have any patience with the elegantly dressed ladies who were playing at keeping shop, and whose rings and bracelets would have realised a larger sum for the Conversion of Old-Clothesmen or any other object in which

they were interested than the whole contents of their stalls. He was irritated by the tinsel decorations and the trashy music, and asked himself how those people, if they really cared two straws for what they pretended to care about, could reconcile so egregious a misappropriation of funds to their consciences. Even the flirtations and the smirking and nodding offended him as being so much pleasure taken under false pretences. He had no sympathy with the Old-Clothesmen's cause—rather the reverse; but he was scarcely less indignant to see it so outrageously robbed and defrauded by those empty-headed triflers who made it a cloak for their own amusement than if it had been the object nearest his heart. As he wandered among the frivolous rose-water-blooded crowd, piloting his way with difficulty among the dresses of the ladies, and lighting on no face that was familiar to him, he felt more misanthropical than ever he had felt in his life before. He hated them all—the heavy dowagers, the simpering daughters, the brainless young men that danced attendance on them—hated himself for coming where such people congregated. What had possessed him to think of such a thing? Was he turning mad, or imbecile, or both?

Presently he came up with Miss Fanshawe, and he questioned himself no longer.

‘Is it not a delightful bazaar?’ said Minna, who had had time to recover herself while Mrs. Fanshawe was shaking hands with Raymond and asking him if he had been here long—a question which for some inscrutable reason or other is always asked on such occasions. ‘Is it not a delightful bazaar? I am sure you must say it has been well got up, though I know you disapprove it on principle.’

‘You have thought it worth while to remember that?’

asked Raymond. It was very agreeable to him to find that she remembered anything he had said.

‘Of course I remember it. And I dare say there is a great deal in your argument—I have been thinking over it and have quite come to that conclusion. Only there is no denying that this bazaar in particular is a very pleasant one, and that it is very nice to be here. You admit that, don’t you, Mr Lee?’

‘Certainly I do,’ he answered, and though a few minutes before he had found everything about him insufferably dull and tedious, what he said now was quite true. It seemed to him as if he could stand for ever listening to her silvery-voiced prattle and watching the varying expression of her bright face.

But before another word could be said on either side, the conversation was interrupted by a female voice chiming in:

‘Mrs. Fanshawe and Minna! I am so delighted. Have you been long here?—I beg your pardon, Mr. Lee, I am very glad to see you. You naughty people, what do you mean by not having paid my stall a visit before this? Where is it? oh! quite close—round the corner here. Arabella is in charge just now, poor girl; I was obliged to go and take a trifle of refreshment—I think I should have dropped in another minute if I had not. Oh yes! very fatiguing work—perfectly killing. If it was not for an absorbing sense of duty, I never could stand a bazaar. I remember last year I held a stall in this very place at a bazaar for—for dear me, I forget now what it was for. But I know I was dreadfully ill, and that nothing could have kept me up but an overpowering interest in the object. Well, I must go back now—I must not leave it all to poor Arabella. Oh! she is very delicate, I can assure you—very delicate indeed. Nay,

but I must insist on your coming with me—and you too, Mr. Lee—you are all my prisoners. Who can one expect to patronise one if not one's friends? This way, please—we are close upon it. I am so very glad to have met you.'

With these words Mrs. Vesey marshalled the party round to the place where Arabella, decked out in her sweetest smiles and her best bonnet, was presiding at a large and well-stocked counter. Raymond went too because he did not very well know how to refuse without being rude, and he did not wish to be rude to a friend of the Fanshawes. But he was very angry as he followed, and felt that he hated Mrs. Vesey with remarkable thoroughness. The woman jarred disagreeably on his nerves. He would almost sooner not have met Minna to-day at all than that the cold shade of worldliness and conventionality as represented by Mrs. Vesey should have thus come between them.

Mrs. Fanshawe and Minna made a purchase or two as was expected of them, and then it was Raymond's turn to be attacked.

'What shall it be, Mr. Lee? A cigar-case—this is a very pretty one, see how beautifully the flowers are embroidered—or a smoking-cap, or a purse, or a pair of slippers? This pair would exactly fit you, I think, and the work is lovely. Shall we say the slippers, Mr. Lee?'

'I don't want any of them,' said Raymond rather surlily, provoked alike by his enemy's importunity and by the insipid nature of the proffered wares. What did he want with embroidered cigar-cases or smoking-caps or worked slippers or other such effeminate trash? 'I would sooner pay twice the price to be rid of them.'

'Oh! Mr. Lee, how can you say such a thing? Dear,

dear! how dreadfully hard you are to please. Let me see, what shall I tempt you with?’

‘I don’t want to be tempted, thank you.’

‘Oh! but I can’t let you go away without contributing something to the cause—I can’t indeed.’

‘If I cared for the cause I would give to the cause without seeking my reward in a pair of slippers even if I wanted them. But, as it happens, I don’t care for one or the other.’

‘What do you care for then? I must find out. This exquisite little vase for a chimney ornament? Or stay—this pair of hand-screens—only two guineas the pair, and so useful, you know.’

Raymond eyed the baubles with supreme contempt.

‘Useful!’ he ejaculated. And then he opened his purse and took out a sovereign which he laid before Mrs. Vesey. ‘Here is my subscription to the cause, but I don’t want any chimney ornaments.’

He could not bear the Fanshawes to think it was the money that he grudged.

‘Oh! Mrs. Vesey, do you actually appraise those unfortunate hand-screens of mine at two guineas?’ asked Minna.

‘That is very complimentary.’

She wanted to see if it would make any difference to Raymond’s views to hear that the despised hand-screens were hers.

‘You are very kind, Mr. Lee, I will take charge of your subscription with a great deal of pleasure. The smallest contributions thankfully received—he! he! Oh! my dear, I don’t think two guineas a bit too much to ask for them—considering it is for charity, you know. Mrs. Wilks has set the same price on the pair you did for her; in fact we con-

sulted together about it first of all, for, the articles being so exactly alike, we thought it best that there should be no difference in the price. Have you seen Mrs. Wilks yet?’

‘No,’ said Mrs. Fanshawe, ‘I have just been wondering that we have not. Where is she?’

‘Oh! such a dreadfully out-of-the-way corner as they have given her, poor woman. The furthest stall under the left-hand gallery is hers—quite buried, you see. But she has so little manner, poor thing—it is just as well, perhaps. You are sure you won’t have the screens, Mr. Lee? They are great beauties.’

‘Quite sure, thank you,’ said Raymond, shrinking back.

He would have held it a kind of sacrilege to let the woman see that he had changed his opinion of the screens in consequence of what he had heard. But in point of fact he wished that he had known that which he now knew when they were originally offered to him—that is, if Mrs. Vesey and the Fanshawes could have been ignorant of his knowledge.

Minna noted Mr. Lee’s answer very carefully, and was conscious of wishing somewhat bitterly that hand-screens had never been invented.

‘Oh! mamma, look!’ she cried enthusiastically, for she was glad of the opportunity of flying off at a tangent. ‘Mrs. Simpson and all the girls. How do you do, dear? I am so glad to see you.’

Instantly she and Mrs. Fanshawe were surrounded by a sea of silks and crinolines, and Raymond fell back some steps, filled with the profoundest aversion for the Simpson party, which consisted of a full-faced matron and three red-cheeked young ladies.

‘Well, this is a pleasure!’ said the elder lady. ‘Have you been long here? A beautiful bazaar, is it not? Which way are you going? oh! it is all the same to us—only too glad to have the pleasure of your company.’

The younger ladies were equally gushing.

So nice to have met each other, isn’t it, dear? I was just saying to Maria how delightful it would be to have Minna with us, and at that very moment Fanny said, “There they are.” I was so pleased.’

Raymond understood that Minna was regularly taken possession of by these people, and lost all care for remaining longer in her company for that day. It was no pleasure to him, but rather a positive pain, to be near her when she was surrounded thus, by worldlings whom he longed to drive away from her, but with whom—they not being visibly burglars or foot-pads, or otherwise disreputable, and he being no more than the newest of her acquaintances—he had no right to interfere. He made his way round to Mrs. Fanshawe, muttered something about an engagement, shook hands with her, bowed to Minna across a vacant space left between the young ladies’ bonnets, and in another moment was lost to sight in the crowd.

Minna walked on with the Miss Simpsons, admiring alternately the music, the stalls, and the decorations, and laughing and talking in apparently the highest spirits. But somehow, in spite of her enthusiasm for everything that she saw, she had a secret feeling that the bazaar was after all a failure.

One of the last stalls the party visited was that at which the presiding goddess was Mrs. Wilks, a fat good-natured woman whom Minna rather liked but thought herself very benevolent for liking. The poor lady in her out-of-the-way

corner had done a very bad business that day, and bewailed her ill-fortune bitterly.

‘Such nice things as I have got too, and such pains as I have taken to set them out well! But people can’t sell if there’s nobody to buy, and it isn’t to be expected that they should. There is one thing I’m glad of, my dear, I have sold those pretty hand-screens of yours. I was afraid the price would be too much, but no—the gentleman put down the money at once and seemed very glad to have them.’

Minna laughed rather constrainedly.

‘A gentleman! What a funny gentleman to buy hand-screens! I suppose he had a wonderfully fair complexion, as he was so careful of it.’

‘No, my dear, quite the contrary—very dark, I should say. But no doubt his wife or his sister had commissioned him; I could not get him to look at anything else.’

‘How odd!’ laughed Minna.

After this she became very silent, only remarking to her companions, as they came away from the stall, what a nice person Mrs. Wilks was.

Decidedly the bazaar had not been a failure.

CHAPTER XII.

JOE’S TROUBLE.

IF Raymond Lee could have had any idea of the prominent place he occupied just now in Minna’s thoughts, he would have been spared a great deal of unpleasing and bitter rumination.

He knew (as how could he help knowing?) that she—this bright beautiful girl with whom a strange freak of his

hitherto dull destiny had made him acquainted—had suddenly come to count for a great deal in his life. He knew that he felt an undefinable hungering for her presence which drove him to seek it against his own better judgment; he knew that in her absence he could not help musing on her, and working her image into the web of his waking and sleeping dreams till the whole texture of his inner existence was changed from what it had been. But when he considered what he must seem in her eyes, he could not imagine the possibility of her feeling anything like a corresponding interest in him, and told himself he was a fool to think of her. Young and fair and radiant as she was, how was it conceivable that she should be attracted towards him—a man so much older than herself, unable even in her presence to appear other than grave and stern as care and disappointment had made him (he little guessed that for her his gravity and sternness constituted one of his chief attractions)—a man whose time-ingrained habits and mode of life rendered him of another world than that in which she had been accustomed to move. In himself he saw the very antipodes of all the qualities which attracted him in her, and did not understand how she could find aught of interest in what was so utterly unlike that which had power over him.

And then, over and above the sense of his personal disqualifications, he had constantly with him an uneasy remembrance of the infamy resting on his father's name and reflected on his own. If it were possible to believe that she might gradually grow to feel for him some of that kindness which he coveted, might not his inherited disgrace be in itself enough to turn the scale against him?

But in spite of an inward assurance that he was only preparing for himself disappointment more bitter than any

he had yet known, he could not resist the secret impulsion which made him desire to see Minna, even at the cost of seeing her in the midst of surroundings that he held in abhorrence. The circumstances that had attended their meeting at the bazaar—the frivolous crowd, the sham of the charity and genuineness of the tinsel, the interposition of the Veseys and the Simpsons—had made the occasion one of almost more pain to him than pleasure; and yet when it was over he sought other such occasions under circumstances equally repugnant to him. Thus, within the two or three weeks following the day of the bazaar, he had obtained a bow from Miss Fanshawe more than once on the long terrace which was the great resort of fashionable promenaders and which he had hitherto avoided like the plague, had exchanged a few words with her at a flower-show which he despised himself for attending, and had helped her with her cloak (very awkwardly) in the vestibule of a concert-room where the best music had been played to an audience who seemed to think it of vital importance that they should listen in their best things. For Mrs. Fanshawe, who under slightly different conditions would have made things easy to him by getting up friendly little dinner and tea-parties, at which he should have unlimited opportunities of talking to the young lady of the house, had reasons of her own for not assisting him just a present.

As has been seen, her ambition for her adopted daughter soared very high; and the fact of the matter was that she waited to see what might happen at that grand *fête* in Fitz-John Park at which a young lord was to be the host, before giving any specific encouragement to an untitled aspirant for Minna's hand.

So that, for a single glimpse of the original of the bright

face that haunted his visions, Raymond had to go through an ordeal which was more irksome to him each time he underwent it; and the worst was that he was only rewarded by seeing Minna through an atmospheric medium that made her appear a great deal further off than when merely material distance divided them. And yet, unsatisfactory as even success always was, he could not keep himself from trying to get a sight of her occasionally. He felt a wild chivalrous desire to rescue her if he could from the contact of the coarse earthy-minded men and women of the world among whom she was thrown, and with whom she looked as incongruously associated as a nymph held prisoner by satyrs. And then besides, he sometimes fancied that when they met she seemed pleased.

He longed to put an end to his suspense by an open declaration of what he felt, but not even when she had looked at him most kindly did he find courage to risk the explanation which was to decide so much. The idea that perhaps he had a chance of winning her after all made him indeed only the more cautious how he threw it away by undue precipitation. If he had been always and altogether desponding, he might have thought that it was good for him to know the worst at once; but, feeling a gleam of hope, he forbore all rash action, and remained anxiously quiescent, as one who, watching a beautiful bird flutter near him with less and less of fear, dreads to frighten it away for ever by prematurely putting forth his hand.

Thus, unsatisfactorily enough, he lived on, knowing that his destiny was, and was to be strongly influenced by another than his own, but not knowing whether he exercised any kindred influence over that other destiny in return, not even having any distinct idea as to when and how he should take

steps to clear up his uncertainty. Yet, unsettled and uneasy as his life just now was, he had never before found it so interesting.

Meanwhile, in spite of all inner preoccupations and distractions, he had been as punctilious as ever in the fulfilment of his external duties and obligations. Among these he had counted his promise to Captain Pullyn to seek out and renew acquaintance with the old school-fellow and *protégé* whose prospects, as he bitterly remembered, had been so cruelly marred by Walter Lee's treachery. And, having once seen Joe as Joe was now that he had arrived at man's estate, Raymond was not satisfied without seeing him many times again. Minna had discovered nothing save vulgarity in the poor youth, but this other observer looked beyond the vulgarity, and discerned a great many excellent qualities which commanded his strong liking and even friendship. To be sure, Raymond had adopted a very different mode of treatment with him from that pursued by Minna. His first object had been to set the good fellow as much as possible at ease by showing that he himself attached no importance to the accidents of his new friend's inferior social status and comparative lack of polish—how entirely accidental had been the latter, so far as Joe was concerned, Raymond remembered but too well. He wanted to make Joe at home with him, and he succeeded. In a very short time this shy awkward young man had got to feel quite friendly with Mr. Lee, and to talk to him as freely as though their acquaintance had continued unbroken for years. And if his modes of expression were not always such as Raymond himself would have chosen, there was nothing in his conversation to denote any innate vulgarity of mind or heart.

One day Raymond had invited his former school-fellow

to dine with him, and as the two were sitting over their wine the conversation fell on Joe's business prospects and his probable departure for Ceylon in the course of that year.

'A first rate opening for you, Joe. Nothing like seeing the world for a young man of your age,' said Raymond, who fancied that his guest was disposed to under-value the advantages of his lot, and wished to put him on good terms with them.

'I suppose so. At least everybody tells me the same thing. It's my want of enterprise not to care about it, no doubt,' uneasily answered Joe, who had set himself to cut a bit of orange-peel on his plate into the smallest possible fragments.

'Do you really not care about it, then? Joe, that is a great pity. A rise from one hundred a-year to three, with the prospect of more in the background, is well worth making a sacrifice for; and as for living out of England for the next few years, it seems to me that a young man of spirit, with no tie to keep him at home' . . .

'There is my father, you know,' put in Joe, fidgeting nervously on his chair.

'Your father does not see very much of you as it is. And when I was over at Hollsworth he seemed to think that five or six years in Ceylon would be the making of you.'

'Five or six years don't look so long to him as to us—to me, I mean,' said Joe, correcting himself in a great hurry and suddenly turning very red.

Raymond thought that the plural pronoun which had been so hastily retracted had included himself, and smiled—a little sadly perhaps—to find that the few years' difference in their ages made such a gulf between them in the younger man's eyes.

'Oh! you won't find five years, or even ten, nearly so formidable as they look, I can assure you. I must not quote my own experience—you would not think that a case in

point—but just count back five years of your own life, and tell me if the time appears so very long.’

‘I don’t know that it does,’ said Joe, fidgeting again. ‘But that is a different thing altogether. I was not situated then as I am now.’

‘You are determined not to be convinced,’ said Raymond smiling.

Joe was silent for some moments. The orange-peel was all chopped up now, and he was busy arranging the pieces into an elaborate pattern.

‘You have been very kind to me, Mr. Lee,’ he began abruptly, before the pattern was quite completed, ‘and I don’t see what call I have to keep a secret from you. I’m engaged to be married, Mr. Lee, and that’s the truth of it, else I shouldn’t care if you packed me off to the moon to-morrow. And she’s the dearest, sweetest little creature, that it will break my heart to part from, pretty near, as you would say too if you saw her. That’s the truth of it, Mr. Lee, and now you have it.’

Having jerked out this confession in strange constrained tones which, in the effort not to betray any bashfulness, sounded almost defiant, Joe relapsed in silence again, and set himself to finish his pattern.

Meanwhile Raymond sat looking at his guest with quite a new feeling of interest. So Joe was in love—who would have thought it? And was to be separated from the object of his attachment. Raymond felt the most fervent pity for the poor young fellow.

‘Is there no way but parting?’ he asked after a pause. ‘You are engaged to this lady, you say? She loves you then—she will surely go with you.’

‘No, she won’t,’ said Joe, shaking his head despondingly

while he carefully put the last touch to his pattern. 'Look here, Mr. Lee,' he burst out suddenly, throwing off his shyness in the all-mastering excitement of the subject, and pushing away his plate with an impetus that shook the pieces of orange-peel into chaos again. 'Look here—she's the best, dearest, kindest little darling in the world, and that's the very identical reason it's no good asking her to have a bit of pity on me. She's got a father, Mr. Lee, that she says she'll never leave with no daughter to take care of him, and do what I will I can't make her say different. Though I can't help thinking Mr. Haroldson would do very well without her, and, as I tell her, my father would go and live with him, and they would be sure to be very happy together, for father and Mr. Haroldson were always the best of friends. Of course it's very true what she says, that my father isn't his daughter, but I don't see that there would be any such great difference, and when I think of having to go away without her, I feel fit to go out of my mind almost. Yes, Mr. Lee, that I do.'

And as Joe spoke he actually brought down his fist on the table by way of emphasis, so completely had every vestige of shyness been swept away in the hurricane of his feelings.

Raymond was very sympathizing.

'My poor Joe! I am very sorry to hear all this. But I think you ought not to urge the young lady against her sense of duty. Wait patiently and all will come right in the end. If you are sure of her love, a little waiting is no such great hardship,' he added, with a touch of bitterness in his tone.

'Isn't it though, Mr. Lee? Ah! you don't know. She is such a darling—nobody who hasn't seen her can tell what a darling she is. You may partly understand that she must

be next door to an angel by her being so fond of her father, and it isn't everybody who would be fond of him, for, not denying he is a very nice man, he is apt to be uncommon hasty at times in his temper. And my poor girl—she never gives him call for it, goodness knows.'

Joe was getting quite a flow of words in his enthusiasm for Amy's virtues.

'Her father is Mr. Haroldson, I think you said? He seems an eccentric man, certainly.'

'He means well, you know,' answered Joe quickly, reflecting that he had spoken about Amy's father in a way Amy would not be likely to thank him for. 'It's his troubles have soured his temper, I think; it isn't altogether his fault.'

'I quite understand that,' said Raymond in a low voice.

Joe was suddenly reminded of the awkwardness of his allusion, and his face all aflame with confusion, hastened to remedy the blunder by adding:

'I think it is fretting after his eldest daughter that has a great deal to do with it. His eldest daughter don't live with him, you know. When she was quite a little child, she went away from him to be brought up by some grand people here at St. Austin's who took a fancy to her (I must not mention names, for I've promised Amy not to), and I don't think he has ever rightly got over it. Ah! if she would only do her duty and come back to live with her poor old father who would give anything to have her, it would be all right with me and Amy then. But it's no good to talk about it,' concluded Joe with a sigh, 'she is a great deal too much of a fine lady for that.'

'Too much of a fine lady to do her duty?' demanded Raymond sternly. He was naturally disposed to take severe views of duty, and this girl who preferred ease and fine-

ladyism to the claims of a father that loved her and pined after her seemed to him a flagrant transgressor.

‘She wouldn’t think it her duty, maybe,’ said Joe, more practical in his views of human nature than his friend. ‘Though I can’t but think myself that it is,’ he added lachrymously, as the recollection of his own trouble rose before him.

‘Unquestionably it is her duty to go to her father if her father desires that she should. Does she know how strongly he feels about it?’

‘I don’t suppose she does exactly; he is too proud to let anything of that sort show more than he can help. But bless you, it wouldn’t make a bit of difference. If I thought it would . . . Do you think it would, Mr Lee? Because I could write to tell her, you know, if it was to do any good, and explain at the same time how things are between me and Amy. But good gracious it wouldn’t be any use—I think I see how she would toss her chin up.’

Joe shook his head, and relapsed into despondency.

‘It might be worth a trial, in any case,’ said Raymond. ‘At least it would be giving the girl a chance of doing her duty.’

‘I’ll think it over, Mr. Lee. But I’m afraid there’s no good to be got, and it would be an uncommon difficult letter to write, you know. And I’m not quite sure either whether Amy would let me, though of course, as far as that goes, I needn’t tell her till it’s done. I’ll think it over, Mr. Lee.’

Here a servant entered with coffee, and the subject dropped for the evening, Joe being too shy to revert to it spontaneously, and Raymond desiring to avoid all appearance of seeking his confidence. But the conversation had left its impression behind it; and when Joe came away from his

friend's house that night, he was thinking much of Minna and of what reception she was likely to give to such an appeal as Mr. Lee seemed to be in favour of.

Raymond was thinking of Minna, too, but exclusively in her character of Miss Fanshawe. As for the girl who was too much of a fine lady to do her duty by her old father, he forgot that such a person existed.

CHAPTER XIII.

LADY FITZ-JOHN'S FÊTE.

THE afternoon sun was shining brightly on the venerable old trees of Fitz-John Park and the venerable old front of Fitz-John Court, lighting up a busy scene where carpenters were at work among the rippling canvass walls of white shining marquees, and upholsterers were putting the last touches to the crimson covering of benches and platforms, and servants were hurrying over the lawn with piles of plate and porcelain. Inside the house was almost as much bustle as without. In the kitchen where delicacies of all kinds were being prepared under the auspices of a French cook hired expressly for the occasion, in the cellars where the heavy-footed butler held solemn counsel with reverential subordinates, in my lady's room where an experienced maid sat sewing lace on my lady's new dress—everywhere the note of preparation sounded.

And yet not quite everywhere. There was one chamber in the house even on that busy afternoon where life was taken easily. This was a small room pleasantly placed on the second floor, where a lowered Venetian blind flapping lazily in the breeze made that luxurious *demi-jour* most

favourable to idleness, and where a young man in dressing-gown and slippers, lolling on a sofa with a cigar in his mouth and a paper in his hand, seemed to be availing himself of the advantages of the situation to the utmost extent. If other people were inclined to kick up a row, this young man certainly was not. He had got hold of a good cigar and the best account of the recent prize-fight, and to everything else he was for the time as stolidly indifferent as the ballet-girl whose gazelle-like and remarkably inexpressive eyes languished upon him from a large gilt frame on the opposite wall, or the pair of Derby winners by whom she was flanked on either side. The room was his lordship's dressing-room, and the young man was his lordship himself, the host and hero of the coming entertainment.

Presently a tap sounded at the door, and the young man, without raising his eyes, opened his mouth to say 'Come in.' But instead of the valet whom he probably expected, there entered a tall lady, with a commanding figure, and a face which had once been beautiful and was still handsome, though now marked by a pinched, anxious expression such as is produced by a long course of unsatisfactory mental arithmetic.

'What! it's you, mother?' said the smoker, looking up languidly as the rustle of feminine drapery caught his ear. 'I'm not going to dress for another hour yet, so it's no good asking me. Confound it, you know how I dislike the whole thing.'

'I know how you dislike most things which it is right and proper that you should like,' replied Lady Fitz-John with stately bitterness. 'But it is not necessary that you should dress yet, though I hope you will be ready in time to receive the earliest of your guests. I come to you now

because I have a few words to say to you in private before the company assembles, and this may be my last opportunity of doing so.'

She seated herself with slow-moving dignity, and her son let his paper drop with an air of sullen resignation.

'Well, mother, what is it all about? Another lecture, of course. I smoke too much to please you, I suppose.'

'Certainly you smoke too much to please me, Albert. And if you cared at all about pleasing me, you would put down your cigar while I am speaking to you.'

Lord Fitz-John had a heavy obdurate-looking lower jaw, and it protruded itself ominously at these words.

'Sorry I can't oblige you, but this is my own dressing-room, I believe. You are always preaching to me about economy; I wonder you want me to throw away a good cigar.'

'Your behaviour is very unbecoming, Albert, but I really have not energy to pursue the subject at present. What I have come to ask of you just now is that you will take a little pains to make yourself agreeable this evening. It will be the first time you have been seen in the neighbourhood since you were a boy, and a great deal may depend on the sort of impression you produce.'

'Very well. But I don't see how you make that out, mother. They can't raise the rate of interest on the mortgage because I produce a bad impression, can they?'

'No. But perhaps you can understand how by producing a bad impression you may lose a good opportunity of paying off the mortgage. You force me to speak plainly, Albert. The Honourable Miss Newtons are coming this evening. As you know, they are the co-heiresses of one of the best

properties in the county. You will disappoint me very much if you do not treat them with particular attention.'

The obdurate-looking lower jaw was again protruded.

'That depends on what they are like. I'm not going to make love to an ugly girl to please any one.'

'They are very nice girls. They called here with their mother last week while you were up in London, and I never saw two young ladies who appeared to me more amiable and accomplished.'

'That means that they are as ugly as sin. And you want me to marry them both, do you?'

'That is a very indecorous jest, Albert. I wish you to pay attention to them both in the first instance, and I do not deny that I should be glad to see you ultimately marry the one of whom your heart may prompt you to make choice. I will not say which of them I would have you prefer. They are both very sweet girls, and there is nothing I more disapprove of than an attempt to force young people's inclinations.'

'Ah! Is that all you have to say just now?'

'Yes, quite all. I hope you are going to oblige me.'

'I'm not going to make love to an ugly girl, if that's what you call obliging you,' said the young man sulkily, so absorbed in lighting a new cigar that he did not even trouble himself to look up.

'Oh! I might have known you would make no sacrifice only for the sake of obliging *me*. But I would have you remember that you have been wasting your property shamefully since you came of age, and that it is your duty to lose no opportunity that presents itself of repairing the mischief you have done. It seems to me that you owe something, if not to

your mother, at least to your own position and the dignity of your family name.'

'By Jove, I wish it was only them I owed anything to.'

'I wish so too, Albert, with all my heart. In a few months your extravagance has undone the result of years of economy and self-denial.'

'Economy and self-denial! Why don't you speak English and call it screwing and pinching?'

'Screwing and pinching, if you will. I am not ashamed of it. Heaven knows that living on the estate would have been a great deal pleasanter to my feelings than letting it. But at least you have to thank my screwing and pinching for entering on an unencumbered property last year. If you had screwed and pinched a little since then in the indulgence of your pleasures, it would have been unencumbered still.'

'Ah! but you see it isn't; more's the pity.'

'It may be again, Albert, if you choose.'

'As I said before, that depends. I'm not going to be dictated to. I say, it's about time you should be going to put on your uniform, isn't it?'

'It is nearly time for me to dress, if that is what you mean,' answered Lady Fitz-John, rising with mournful dignity. 'Well, I see you wish me to go, and I will not trouble you longer, but I do request that you will give your serious attention to what I have said.'

'We'll see about it,' said the young man with a grunt, picking up his newspaper from the floor, and turning the pages to and fro till he had found his place. 'But I'm not going to be dictated to. Ta, ta, mother.'

Lady Fitz-John said no more, and left the room with a sigh.

Two hours had passed, and the invited guests were thronging thick and fast into Fitz-John Park.

The arrangements for their reception were now quite finished, commanding by their magnificence and completeness the admiration of all who looked. Lady Fitz-John, in spite of a long apprenticeship in economy, could do things in style when she chose, and this was one of the occasions on which she did choose. It seemed to her right and proper that something very grand should be done to celebrate the coming of age of a young lord; and though the self-willed young lord's absence on the Continent and in London had deferred the festivities till nearly a year after the event of which they were to be in honour, she seized the first opportunity of holding them, on the principle that it was never too late to perform an act of duty. The same instinct of orthodoxy that prompted the giving of an entertainment which could ill be afforded had determined also its *al-fresco* character. It might have been more convenient simply to have a ball indoors, but Lady Fitz-John had a notion that on the occasion of a lord's majority there ought to be a disporting of faithful and devoted tenantry on the lawn, and a feasting of the same under tents. In the present case the tenants unfortunately had to be dispensed with, being too few to make a show by themselves, and too vulgar to be admitted to mix with the private friends of the family; but so much the stronger was the reason for adhering rigidly to the lawn and the tents.

The scene in the park when the greater part of the company was assembled was a very brilliant one. Lady Fitz-John, surveying it from the pretty little pavilion which she had for the time made her headquarters, and where she stood surrounded by a select staff of her own more special

acquaintances, felt a serene assurance that, be the bill what it might, she had at least met a great occasion in a spirit worthy of it. She had done her duty, and had nothing to reproach herself with. If only she could depend on her son doing his! She looked at him anxiously as he stood near her masking a yawn with his glove, and wondered uneasily what the Honourable Miss Newtons would think of him.

The Honourable Miss Newtons and their mother were presently seen wending their way towards the pavilion, and Lady Fitz-John, treating them with peculiar distinction, made a few steps forward to meet them.

‘My dear Lady Amelia, what a pleasure this is! You are quite well, I hope? and your daughters? I am so glad to see you all. Will you allow me to introduce my son to you? Albert, my dear, where are you?’

Lord Fitz-John, being thus summoned, came slowly up and underwent the ceremony of introduction, but his mother saw only too surely that he was not in the mood for doing his duty. He looked first at one of the girls, and then at the other, and his heavy lower jaw took its most obdurate expression. He was not himself particularly good-looking, but he was as exacting in his ideas of female beauty as the handsomest of men could be; and neither the Honourable Miss Newton, who was freckled and sandy-haired, nor the Honourable Miss Sophia Newton, who was freckled and red-haired, came up to his standard.

His mother was afraid, not without reason, that he would endeavour to make his escape, and determined to hold him prisoner if she could.

‘Suppose we go to table now? I am sure you must all feel the want of some refreshment after your long drive. Albert, will you give your arm to one of these ladies?’

The young man saw the trap that had been laid for him, and resented it. He cast a quick glance of rebellious defiance at his mother, and looked round, as though imagining that her request referred to a group of some half-dozen ladies who stood behind him. In an instant he had singled out the most presentable of these, and advanced to offer her his arm. It happened that the person thus distinguished was Arabella Vesey.

Many and various were the internal and expressed comments of the spectators when Lord Fitz-John was seen escorting Miss Vesey into the long marquee set apart as banqueting-tent. His mother was angry enough to have pushed the young lady out of the Fitz-John territory with both hands, could she have perpetrated such a breach of hospitality with any kind of decorum. Lady Amelia Newton and the Honourable Miss Newtons put down their noble host as an ill-mannered brute; Mrs. Fanshawe laughed hysterically and remarked to her next neighbour that wonders would never cease; while Minna—consigned to the unsympathising companionship of a stout elderly gentleman who was moreover married—said nothing, but inwardly protested that for her own part she could not imagine what anybody could see in the girl. The other guests were more or less critical according to their respective temperaments; but it is a melancholy fact that of all present not one was thoroughly pleased with Miss Vesey's good fortune with the exception of the young lady herself and her mother. Of both these, however, it must be said that they were delighted beyond measure.

The feasting and the subsequent speech-making—for on such an occasion it was of course indispensable that the young lord's health should be drunk, and that the young

lord, however briefly and ungraciously, should return thanks—occupied some time between them, so that, before they were over, the sun had set and the shades of evening began to close over the scene.

When at last the company emerged again into the open air, they found the park illuminated with coloured lanterns hung among the trees, and saw a large and brilliant transparency in the act of being lighted up in front of a huge temporary erection of painted wood and canvass which stood at the bottom of the grounds. This was the dancing pavilion, for Lady Fitz-John, having a notion that a faithful and devoted tenantry, if such had been to be had, would have testified their loyalty by dancing on the green, was determined that dancing there must and should be—not perhaps exactly on the green, but in some place more rustic and make-shift in its character than the regular ball-room. Hither the steps of all the guests were now directed, and soon a goodly number of them were assembled in a large octagonal room with canvass sides, but otherwise with no rusticity about it, being faultlessly decorated and brilliantly lighted, and further supplied with the services of a very excellent band.

Arabella Vesey still retained possession of Lord Fitz-John. She had talked a great deal, and had otherwise done her very best to create an impression; and though it was evidently not his lordship's way to be demonstrative, she fondly flattered herself that she had succeeded. She marked his abstracted air as they stood together in the doorway of the dancing-room, and thought that he was considering how he should frame an invitation to her to be his partner in the first dance. But Miss Vesey was deplorably mistaken, for in truth his lordship was considering how he should best

disencumber himself of her. He began to find her something of a bore—perhaps she had been a little too visibly anxious to make herself agreeable—and, besides, he had caught sight of a much prettier girl sitting some way above him at table in the banqueting-tent.

Presently Minna entered with the elderly gentleman who was her cavalier, and who, not dancing himself, made haste to emancipate her by leading her to a seat. Then it was that, to Miss Vesey's infinite surprise and disappointment, Lord Fitz-John gave a twirl to his moustache, and said:

‘You must be tired of standing. Let me find a seat for you.’

With which words Arabella found herself deposited on the nearest bench and left to her own meditations. In another moment she had the mortification of seeing the young lord stand before Minna Fanshawe, and Minna Fanshawe rise and put her arm within his. Minna was going to lead off the first dance with Lord Fitz-John.

It was the first time that Minna's hand had ever rested on a lord's coat-sleeve, and she found the sensation vastly agreeable. She stole a furtive glance at her partner, and was obliged to admit to herself that he was not handsome—his eyes and mouth were too heavy, and his cheeks too swollen and puffy—and yet, in spite of this disparaging estimate, she could not help feeling profoundly grateful to him for having chosen her. It was so pleasant to stand up with him at the top of the room, with the consciousness that all present were looking at her, and that in a few days everybody she knew would have heard how at the *fête* Lord Fitz-John had singled her forth from all others. And Mr. Lee would hear of it too, of course. What would he think of it?

The music was very loud, and, eloquence not being Lord Fitz-John's strong point, he did not make any attempt at conversation during the dance, beyond a remark, two or three times reiterated, that it was uncommonly hot; while Minna was too much oppressed by the novelty of her position, and the sense of being the cynosure of all eyes, to do more than attend to her steps and agree with him. But when the dance was over, and they were quietly promenading the room arm-in-arm, they both felt equal to higher conversational efforts.

'The worst of dancing is that it always makes a place so hot,' observed his lordship, striking out a spirited variation of his thesis.

'It does indeed. And yet we ought not to feel too warm here; the room is so delightfully large and airy,' answered Minna, anxious to show that she too could be original. She would have been glad to find some slightly more abstruse subject to dilate upon, but she was too nervous to improvise one on the spur of the moment; and, besides she had a comfortable conviction that his lordship was not critical.

'Hum—yes—well enough considering. The fact is, it would be hot anywhere such weather as this.'

'The weather is getting very warm now, certainly. But it is what we must expect now, I suppose, and anything is better than the cold and wet we had last week.'

'Confound it, yes—anything better than that. Confound it, the rain last week cost me five thousand pounds if it cost me a penny.'

'Indeed!' said Minna, wondering reverentially. 'Ah! to be sure, so much rain must have injured the grain very much, I suppose.'

Lord Fitz-John looked puzzled, and stroked his moustache thoughtfully.

‘The grain! Oh! I see, I see—it’s the crops you’re thinking of. I don’t know what it did to them, I’m sure, but I know it spoiled Miss Mary’s running. Course cut up for all the world like a ploughed field.’

‘Oh indeed!’ said Minna, ‘that was a pity.’ She dared not say more, not having any certainty as to who Miss Mary might be.

‘Pity! I should think so. Ever see Miss Mary run? No?—ah!—great mistake that; finest filly in England I’ve always said, and I say so still. But the ground last week was as heavy as a soaked sponge. By the way, do you see The Conqueror’s scratched?’

She began to have a notion that he was talking about racing, and answered with a light little laugh—she knew that she laughed very becomingly:

‘Oh! I am the most unenlightened person in the world about such things. I was only at a race once, and then I did not understand a bit about it, except indeed that the horses were very beautiful, and as glossy as if they had just stepped out of one of Landseer’s pictures. Are you a great admirer of Landseer?’

She wanted to get the subject shifted to pictures if she could, feeling that she understood them somewhat better than horses, and was a little disappointed when he went on:

‘Landseer—hum—I don’t know. What race was it you went to? Ah! no wonder you didn’t like it; they never make good running there. Why, last year Old Nick walked over the course—walked over it, ’pon my honour he did, and between you and me, Old Nick is no better than a screw.’

Minna was getting to find the conversation rather tiresome. It was very nice of Lord Fitz-John to talk so much to her—very nice indeed, and she felt truly grateful to him for it; but how different he was from Mr. Lee! A much better lord Mr. Lee would make, certainly. He was so very intellectual, and this one did not seem intellectual at all—indeed quite stupid in comparison.

Her treasonable free-thinking had reached this point when suddenly the band struck up anew, and began playing a waltz. Minna was both glad and sorry; glad to be relieved from the necessity of carrying on a conversation she did not care about, and sorry that the season of her triumph was so near its close, for of course her partner must transfer his attentions to some other young lady now—perhaps back again to Arabella Vesey. But just as she was thinking thus, just as possibly his lordship was thinking thus too, Lady Fitz-John, near whom they were passing at the moment, touched her son's arm and uttered the one word:

‘Albert!’

The remonstrance was spoken in a low voice—so low as to be heard by none save the person for whom it was intended; but its effect was instantaneous.

‘Suppose we go in for this waltz?’ he asked Minna.

She inclined her head, and in a moment more his arm was about her waist and the pair were whirling round the room, leaving Lady Fitz-John nothing less than dumb-founded at the unheard-of audacity of their conduct.

Minna was delighted, there is no denying it. Under ordinary circumstances she would have been scandalised at the solecism of dancing the two first dances of the evening with the same gentleman; but, as things were, she felt honoured even beyond her deserts. Her partner's eyes were

dull, and his complexion was tallowy, and she thought him rather stupid than otherwise; and yet she was proud that all should see him dancing with her. Poor Minna!—she had not been accustomed to dance with lords. And then did she not know that every other young lady in the room, including some more accustomed to lords than herself, was watching her with secret rage?

The feelings of the other young ladies were destined to a good deal of further outrage that evening. In spite of her want of enthusiasm about races, Lord Fitz-John had come to the conclusion that Minna was far better fun than any other girl present—a conclusion in which his experience of the rest only confirmed him when, for form's sake, he was obliged to give some of them a turn. The consequence was that, as he was not a man to deny himself any pleasure within his reach, he was by Minna's side during the greater part of the evening, either dancing with her—and certainly he danced uncommonly well—or endeavouring to enlighten her ignorance on sporting subjects. Lady Fitz-John was furious (she felt quite friendly towards poor Arabella now), but Lady Fitz-John's wrath was powerless to arrest the flow of the flirtation. To the end of the evening her wilful son persisted in devoting himself almost exclusively to Minna, and, when the end came, went out to help her with his own lordly hand into the carriage. Minna exulted exceedingly; the fumes of so much honour had got fairly into her head.

There was another person who exulted besides Minna. As soon as the carriage had driven off, Mrs. Fanshawe turned round, and embraced her adopted daughter rapturously.

'Dear, dear child — what a darling you are! I never saw anything so marked in my life. Kiss me again, my sweet pet.

You will always find a corner in your heart for poor mamma, won't you? I'll tell you what we will do—we'll give a ball directly, and ask him and his mother. She won't come very likely, but he will. Oh yes! *he* will, my darling, never fear. What do you think? is it not a good plan?'

'I dare say it is,' said Minna, turning away her head to look out at the moon-lit road. 'It is a long time since we had a ball, and we owe invitations to a good many. You know best, mamma, of course.'

And then she gave a deep sigh, which Mrs. Fanshawe did not hear in the excitement of calculating who was and who was not stylish enough to be invited on so momentous an occasion.

When Minna reached her own room that evening she forgot to ring for her maid, and sat for a long time dreamy and pensive at her toilet-table, so absorbed in reverie that she mechanically loosened her long braids of shining hair and let them fall flowing about her shoulders without once raising her eyes to the mirror to see the effect. Whether the meditations which engrossed her thus were more pleasing or displeasing in their nature it would have been difficult for the closest observer to conclude, for at one moment she smiled and at another sighed heavily. Probably she herself hardly knew the complexion of her thoughts until at last she was startled into self-consciousness by catching herself in the act of asking:

'Oh! why does he not make haste?'

No sound had passed her lips, the words having only been uttered mentally, nevertheless she started violently, and a crimson blush suffused itself over her face and neck. For she knew that thought thus obscurely expressed in the recesses of her heart would, if fully interpreted, have run

thus: 'Why does he not make haste to speak before I am carried off by another?' and she knew further that the 'he' stood to represent Raymond Lee.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT MINNA DID WITH THE BOUQUET.

BUT Raymond Lee, unfortunately not knowing what reason there was for making haste, and fearing above all things to mar a possible chance by over-precipitation, still deferred the decisive moment.

Day followed day, week followed week, and all that Minna knew certainly was that, whereas formerly he had never shown himself at places of fashionable resort, she now met him in public frequently, always by himself, and always apparently indifferent to what interested the crowd around him. She had her own theory as to what was the probable cause of so abrupt a change in his habits, and her own fancies about the expression of his eyes when they rested upon her; but all this was mere speculation, founded on very imperfect observation. For except in public she had no opportunity at this time of seeing him. Mrs. Fanshawe still abstained from asking Mr. Lee to spend another friendly evening with them; and Minna, though pondering much over the omission, had not yet found courage to make any suggestion on the subject. In the meantime it was something to her that he had received and accepted an invitation for the grand ball which Mrs. Fanshawe had lost no time in organizing, and at which Lord Fitz-John and his mother were expected to be present. To this festivity

Minna looked forward with strangely conflicting feelings, hardly knowing whether she most desired or dreaded its approach.

Desired or dreaded, the momentous date drew near and nearer, and at last the day arrived preceding that fixed for the ball. In the forenoon of this day Minna received two very unexpected visits. Mrs. Fanhawe had gone out to give some final orders with reference to the entertainment of the following evening, while Miss Fanshawe remained at home busy with the fabrication of a contemptuous little note in the third person, which, short as it was, she had some trouble in making as contemptuous as she wished. Scarcely had this missive been sealed and handed to a servant to post, when Minna, just settling herself down to an hour's quiet embroidery, was disturbed by her maid entering the neat little boudoir to say:

‘If you please, miss, there’s a young pers—a young lady downstairs who wants particularly to see you. John said he didn’t know if you were at home.’

‘A young lady! Who is it?’

‘She wouldn’t give her name, miss. She said you would be sure to know who it was when you heard she wanted to see you. I was thinking,’ continued the woman respectfully, seeing that her mistress still looked perplexed, ‘that perhaps it is the same young lady you told us of who was to be shown straight into your room.’

Minna gave a little start—she had evidently forgotten all about Amy’s promised visit—but, recovering herself, said with a dignified iciness which lowered the maid’s opinion of the unknown young person more than even the unfashionable cloak and dowdy bonnet in which she had come arrayed:

‘Tell the young lady I am ready to see her.’

And then she folded her hands with great stateliness, and majestically awaited the appearance of the visitor.

Surely something must have happened to alter Minna's feelings towards her sister very considerably since their last parting.

Amy was shown in, and the door was shut upon her, but even then Minna did not become much more cordial.

'How do you do? Pray sit down.'

Amy did not seem surprised at the frigidity of her welcome, nor indeed to have expected anything different. She sat down as she was told, and, after what appeared a painful pause, began:

'Joe was at our house last night, and told me that he had been writing to you.'

'Oh indeed! Then he told you of a very unwarrantable liberty he had been taking. There has been nothing in our acquaintance—if acquaintance it can be called—which could justify him in attempting to lecture me on my duties, or, for that matter, in addressing me at all. I hope he will understand from my reply that I expect to be troubled no further on the subject.'

She spoke these words with an air which was, and was meant to be, as severely grand as possible, for she fancied that Amy had come to second Joe's appeal, and she was determined to let her see beforehand the futility of all attempts at aggression. But, somewhat to her embarrassment, Amy did not carry herself aggressively at all, and, clasping her little hands together, went on in tones of humble entreaty and deprecation which took Minna quite by surprise.

'I have come to say how very sorry I am that it should have happened. It was very foolish of Joe, and I have told

him so, but I hope you will look it over—for my sake, you know. For indeed, indeed, it was not my fault. I had no idea he ever thought of doing such a thing till he told me last night, and I am sure neither had father.'

'Oh! as for that, I never suspected my father of having anything to do with it,' replied Minna, with a touch of bitterness showing through her dignity. 'After what has passed, it was impossible to suppose that he could be so extremely desirous to have me near him as Mr. Pullyn's lively imagination represented. It seems to me that Mr. Pullyn has taken a liberty with my father as well as myself,' she added, relapsing into severity.

'It was a very great liberty,' said Amy penitently. 'But I am sure I have made him see that he has done wrong, and you will look it over, won't you? And you will believe that I had nothing to do with it, please, for upon my word I had not—I never thought of asking anything so unreasonable of you for a moment. Please look it over, dear Minnie; I cannot bear that you should be offended with us.'

Minna's heart was not made of stone, and the spectacle of shy little Amy's distress fairly melted it.

'Dear, dear Amy, don't say another word about it, and I promise you I'll never think of it again. I am only sorry I was in such a hurry to send away my answer to Mr. Pullyn's foolish letter, but it won't do him any harm, and next time you see him you can tell him to tear it up, as I will tear up what he wrote me, and all shall be as though nothing of the kind had happened.'

But sometimes it is not so easy to annul the consequences of a rash act as Minna seemed to imagine.

'Kiss me, Amy, and we'll say no more about it. Now take off your bonnet, dear, and let us begin to enjoy ourselves

Nonsense, I won't have any excuses—you are going to spend the whole afternoon with me, and nothing less will serve. Do you hear me? take off your bonnet directly.'

Her pretty imperiousness was quite irresistible, and Amy had nothing for it but to do as she was bid, looking, however, so shy and frightened that Minna thought it necessary to reassure her.

'Oh! there is nothing to be afraid of, I can promise you, unless it is me, and I am not so very formidable a person, I hope. Nobody will dare to intrude upon us here, and here we will stop all day, and have luncheon brought to us, and be very cosy and happy. In this room you are under my roof; it is my boudoir, and held specially sacred to me.'

Amy looked reverentially round, for the first time taking note of the grandeur about her, which hitherto had only vaguely impressed her with a general sense of awe.

'Is it indeed? It is very beautiful.'

And she thought with amazement of the condescension which her sister had shown in occupying that poor little bedroom at Black Moor Farm which was all she had been able to offer her.

'It is rather a pretty room, I think,' said Minna complacently—'all fitted up according to my own taste, you know. And yonder is my bedroom leading out of it, and beyond that again my dressing-room. Would you like to come and look at them, dear? and then you will know all about me and my local habitation.'

She thought she would be doing a very hospitable thing in entertaining her sister with an exhibition of her belongings, but in truth it was pleasant for herself to have some one to show them to who was so fresh to splendour of all kinds as Amy.

‘I should like it very much, please,’ said Amy timidly, following her sister into the next room. ‘Oh dear! how very fine everything is!’

‘There is my bed, you see, in that recess—a neat little concern, is it not? How do you like the colour of the curtains? And there is my book-case with all my pet books in it and my pet statuettes on the top.’

‘I never saw anything half so beautiful,’ said Amy, looking round with unconcealed wonder and admiration.

Minna was not surprised at the remark, and yet could not help being pleased.

‘I am glad you like my snugery, dear. I think it really is rather a nice one.’

‘It is indeed,’ fervently assented Amy, averting her eyes nervously from her own shabby little figure incongruously reflected in a gilt looking-glass. ‘And that is your dressing-table, I suppose—how handsome it is, and what beautiful scent-bottles these are! And oh! what a magnificent nose-gay!’

‘Very fine flowers, are they not? Lord Fitz-John cut them for me the other day,’ replied Minna with an assumed carelessness which was in reality (though she did not know it) the rankest ostentation. For if she intended anything by it, she intended Amy to conclude that receiving a bouquet from a lord was an every-day occurrence which she thought nothing of.

Ostentation notwithstanding, Minna’s account of how she came by the flowers was strictly true. She and Mrs. Fanshawe, driving near Fitz-John Park the week before, had been met by his lordship, who had insisted that they should enter and see his mother. He remembered with some resentment that when they had called a few days previously

to pay her their respects after the *fête*, she had chosen not to be at home; and he could not neglect so good an opportunity of circumventing and annoying her. As might have been expected, her reception of the visitors was not very gracious, and, as might also have been expected, her son was in consequence more demonstrative than ever in his attention to them, or at least to one of them. He talked to Minna perseveringly the whole time, and, when she admired some cut flowers ornamenting the table, would not be satisfied till she and Mrs. Fanshawe had accompanied him to the conservatory, where he stripped more than one of his mother's favourite plants to make the bouquet which Amy now admired. So that Minna might well feel a little proud of it and the lordly homage it represented.

On hearing so grand a name so familiarly pronounced, Amy appeared very properly impressed.

'Lord Fitz-John!' she repeated in tones of respectful surprise exceedingly agreeable to Minna. 'You know Lord Fitz-John very well then?'

'Oh yes! we know him, of course,' said Minna, still struggling to keep up her assumption of carelessness. 'He and his mother are coming to our house to-morrow; we are going to have a ball.'

'Indeed! I suppose it is to be very grand.'

'Well, I don't know about that. Everything will be very nice of course. Would you like to see my new dress?'—the instinct of feminine nature was too strong for her here, and her manner became animated again. 'It came home last night, and it does look so well. This way, dear, it is hanging up in the dressing-room.'

Amy went into the dressing-room, and was struck dumb by the splendour of the fabric there displayed to her.

‘It is a beauty, is it not?’ asked Minna delightedly.

‘It seems almost too good to wear,’ murmured Amy.

‘Ah! but it was made to wear,’ rejoined Minna more philosophically.

‘How very beautiful you will look in it!’ said Amy thoughtfully, gazing first at the dress, and then at her sister, as though trying to realise the effect of a combination.

‘You little flatterer! Well, perhaps I shan’t be quite a fright. And then I am to have a beautiful head dress of lilies and forget-me-nots—it has not come home yet, or I would let you see it, Blue and white are the colours that become me best, you know. Oh yes! I think I shall look tolerably well.’

‘I am sure of it,’ said Amy earnestly.

‘The drawing-rooms are to be festooned with blue and white on purpose,’ went on Minna, getting more and more communicative as she found how appreciative a listener she had to do with. ‘We have tried the effect this morning in the little drawing-room, and it looks so nice, you can’t think. Suppose you come and take a peep; there is nobody downstairs just now; mamma—Aunt Fanshawe—isn’t back yet, I know. Come, I really should like you to see, and then to-morrow night you will be able to picture everything to yourself quite exactly.’

‘I should like it too,’ said Amy wistfully. ‘If only you are sure Aunt Fanshawe is not at home.’

‘Oh! I am quite sure, dear. Come along.’

And, lightly tripping, she led the way downstairs.

‘What a handsome staircase!’ commented Amy.

‘Ah! is it? Yes, well enough,’ said Minna almost surprised at the observation, for she had always taken the staircase for granted. ‘It will look very different to-morrow night, you

know, lighted and done up with evergreens. This way, dear; what we call the little drawing-room is on this side.'

'It's like a palace!' exclaimed Amy with a long breath, as the vision of the little drawing-room—with chalked floor, and doorways hung with blue and white drapery, and flower-wreathed mirrors and chandeliers—burst upon her astonished view. 'I never saw anything like it in my life. What splendid looking-glasses, to be sure! And oh dear! what tall windows!—I should think you were always afraid of an accident with so much glass.'

'We should only have to get it mended again, you know,' said Minna, feeling a little amused at her sister's delicious *naïveté*. 'These windows open on the garden, you see, they are very convenient.'

'So they are. What a beautiful garden you have got!'

'It is larger than you can see from here; it goes quite round the house. Will you step out and look at it? we can go in again by the back way.'

She threw the folding leaf of the window open as she spoke, and stepped on to the terrace of turf running outside.

But no sooner had she done this than she started violently, and came to an abrupt stop. The garden-gate, left ajar by a careless servant, was being pushed open by a hand from without; and, quick as lightning, the idea of that little country-girl and herself being caught together by visitors flashed across Minna's mind in all its horror. It was too late, however, to retreat now. Already the gate had been opened, and a tall figure appeared coming up the garden towards the house. And no sooner was Minna aware of the tall figure than she was aware also, almost without looking, that it was Raymond Lee's.

She was very much surprised, so much surprised that for a moment she nearly forgot the awkwardness of Amy's presence, and—no doubt from surprise too—found herself all at once strangely tremulous.

He seemed to discover her almost as instantaneously as she had recognised him, and, leaving the gravelled way immediately, struck across the lawn towards the window of the little drawing-room. In another moment they had shaken hands.

'Pray step inside, Mr. Lee,' said Minna nervously, when, hardly knowing how, she had got through the first formalities of greeting. 'Mamma is out just now, but I do not think she will be long.'

She turned back into the room. Amy had been standing close behind her, and was now observed for the first time by Raymond, who silently inclined his head to her as he entered. But even on this, Minna made no attempt to introduce her.

Minna was now in terrible embarrassment. She did not know what to do—not even whether to ask Raymond to sit down. If he sat down, she must sit down too; and it was manifestly out of the question that they should both be seated while Amy was standing. It might have seemed easy to offer Amy a chair also, but to Minna this solution of the difficulty was very undesirable. For Amy's sitting down would have destroyed any illusion that Raymond might peradventure entertain as to her being a young person sent by the upholsterer to assist in the decorations; and Minna did not wish such an illusion to be destroyed. It was very cowardly of her, and she knew it, and resolved that as soon as they were alone she would make Amy a handsome present out of her jewel-case. In the meanwhile, she did not give

her poor little sister so much as a look, and Amy, feeling dreadfully confused, shrank behind her once more, and glanced anxiously towards the door.

‘I must apologise for this intrusion, Miss Fanshawe,’ began Raymond, looking and feeling at least as much embarrassed as the other two. ‘But I think I heard Mrs. Fanshawe say the other day that she would like to be at the launch of the *Ulysses*.’

‘I know mamma wanted to go,’ faltered Minna. ‘But papa was too late in applying, and there were no tickets left.’

‘I have just received a contractor’s order,’ said Raymond eagerly (he did not add that it had been sent him in answer to a very urgent application.) ‘And I have come to say that it is quite at your disposal—and Mrs. Fanshawe’s. I am sorry the notice is so short, but it is not twelve yet, and if you are there by one o’clock you will be in time.’

Minna’s heart leapt high at the prospect of spending an afternoon in Raymond’s company; for of course he would go if they went—would probably indeed escort them. But immediately afterwards it sank again. How could she treat Amy with such rudeness as to leave her after making her promise to stay for the afternoon? And then, supposing this difficulty overcome, Mrs. Fanshawe was not at home, and Minna would have been afraid of taking on herself the responsibility of accepting Raymond’s civility. She had an instinct that her mamma rather wanted to keep Mr. Lee at arm’s length for the present.

‘You are very good,’ she said in a low voice. ‘But — but — I am particularly engaged at home this afternoon.’

She glanced uncomfortably round, hoping that Amy

would not betray what the detaining cause was. But Amy was no longer in the room, having watched her opportunity to edge towards the door and slip out unobserved. For the first time in her life, Minna was alone with Mr. Lee, and the discovery did not diminish her embarrassment.

Without being told, Raymond appeared to understand that the stranger had something to do with the pleaded engagement, for he went on to argue:

‘The order does not put any limit on numbers. Your friend—the young lady—can accompany you if you like.’

Minna’s opinion of Amy was considerably raised by the discovery that Raymond, less observant of unfashionable dress-making than the acute lady’s maid, had taken her for a young lady after all. But still she had no choice except to refuse; in spite of Raymond’s liberality of judgment, she would not have been seen in public with Amy for all the world.

‘My friend is staying to luncheon with me’—she was not ashamed of mentioning this little fact since Amy had received Mr. Lee’s endorsement. ‘And she would be too tired for sight-seeing, I am sure; she comes from a great distance.’

Raymond looked disappointed—as in truth he was, more by the visible constraint of Minna’s manner than by her refusal of the order.

‘You will not be able to go then?’

‘We shall not indeed. I am very sorry,’ she added quickly, fearing that she might have offended him.

But he was not offended, only disappointed and disheartened.

They both stood still a moment, rather sadly and very awkwardly (Minna’s wonted *savoir-faire* had all evaporated to-day), and then Raymond said:

‘I must not stay longer now; I am keeping you from your friend.’

‘Will you not wait to see mamma?’ she asked tremulously.

‘Not to-day. Good-bye, Miss Fanshawe.’

‘Good-bye. We shall see you to-morrow evening?’

He had just been thinking to himself that he would never come again—the pain was greater than the pleasure—and was a little staggered by the question.

‘Perhaps it would be better for me to make my excuses,’ he said after a pause. ‘The truth is I had no right to accept Mrs. Fanshawe’s invitation. I don’t dance, and have no business at balls.’

A sudden terror quivered through Minna’s heart; Raymond was vexed with her, and was going to leave her for ever.

‘Oh! but you will come!’ she cried hastily. And in her voice was a ring of supplication which she detected directly after the words were spoken, and the consciousness of which made her colour come and go rapidly.

Raymond must have detected it too, for she felt his eyes on her face instantly.

‘Do you care for my coming, then?’ she heard him say in low earnest tones.

She could not speak; she was almost choked by the tumultuous beating of her heart, and her colour came and went more rapidly than ever.

As for Raymond, a hope had seized him which seemed to make his blood turn to fire within his veins. The moment he had so long looked for, so often well-nigh despaired of, had surely come.

He took her hand, and she made no attempt to withdraw it.

But just as he was about to speak the words which rose straight from his heart to his lips, the sound of wheels was heard without; and, looking round, Raymond and Minna both saw through the open window Mrs. Fanshawe's carriage, with Mrs. Fanshawe in it, rolling up the drive. Mrs. Fanshawe saw them too, and, though looking decidedly surprised at first, recovered herself sufficiently to smile and nod graciously.

Minna's mother though he deemed her, Raymond had never succeeded in liking Mrs. Fanshawe, and her advent at this moment jarred upon him as something antipathetic and discordant. He let Minna's hand go, and the passionate words that had been hovering on his lips resolved themselves into a tame

‘Good-bye, Miss Fanshawe.’

But Minna knew very well that when he had taken her hand he had meant more than only to say good-bye. And, knowing this, she wished with all her heart that something had occurred to detain her mamma a few minutes longer.

Mrs. Fanshawe entered the room immediately afterwards, for she was not willing that so dangerous a *tête-à-tête* should be prolonged. She was a good deal relieved to find Raymond on the point of leaving, and still more so when he explained that he had called with an order for viewing the launch, of which he understood that an engagement would prevent Mrs. and Miss Fanshawe from availing themselves. On discovering that Minna had been so prudent, Mrs. Fanshawe felt that she could afford to be cordial, and thanked Raymond very warmly for his courtesy.

‘So very kind of you, Mr. Lee—really so excessively kind!’

I am particularly sorry that—a—hem—a prior engagement What! are you really going so soon? that is too bad. Well, to-morrow we shall have the pleasure of seeing you again?’

This time Raymond made no objection on the score of not dancing.

‘I shall certainly come,’ was his answer, and Minna noted it with internal satisfaction.

When Raymond was gone, Mrs. Fanshawe praised Minna for her discretion.

‘You were quite right to say we were engaged, my love. We have a great many things to do just now, it would have been very inconvenient to give up so much time.’

‘But I really was engaged, mamma,’ said Minna.

The theory that she had made a false excuse to Raymond was singularly distasteful to her. And then she explained how Amy had come to see her and was at that moment in the house.

Mrs. Fanshawe received the news rather ungraciously, but did not oppose Minna’s entertaining her sister for that afternoon if she chose, and Minna accordingly went upstairs to rejoin her guest, whom she found demurely sitting in the bedroom contemplating the bouquet on the toilet-table.

‘I owe you a great many apologies, Amy dear. I hope you have not been very dull sitting all this time by yourself.’

‘Oh no! thank you, I have had so many pretty things to look at, you know. Can you tell me the name of this beau-ti-ful flower? I have been admiring it so very much.’

Minna took up the bouquet carelessly.

‘Really I can’t, dear. I’m not a bit of a botanist. But here it is for you if you like.’

And, thus speaking, she drew forth the flower to which her sister had called attention—the largest and finest of the bunch.

‘Oh Minnie! to spoil your beautiful nosegay like that! I am so sorry!’ said Amy remorsefully.

‘Sorry! what are you sorry for? Why, you don’t think I mind about spoiling it, do you? The great stupid thing; it is a week old nearly—not fit to be kept a day longer. Pah! it is getting quite unpleasant!’

And with these words Lord Fitz-John’s bouquet was tossed contemptuously out of the window. Yet only that morning Minna had trimmed the stalks carefully and changed the water with her own hands.

CHAPTER XV.

AN UNPLEASANT SURPRISE FOR RAYMOND.

RAYMOND left Minna’s presence that day in a kind of waking trance.

He seemed to be living and moving in an enchanted atmosphere of his own, through which nothing was visible save Minna’s bright face mantling with conscious blushes, and nothing audible save Minna’s persuasive voice saying, ‘Oh! but you will come.’ He was so happy that he could scarcely believe in his own happiness, and yet his recollections of that face and that voice assurred him that it was real. And with this assurance came a feverish longing to see her again, to speak the words he had been going to speak when he took her hand, and to hear from her lips the answer. He determined that at the ball of the next evening he would seek her and tell her plainly of his love; and to

the ball he looked forward with a wild impatience strangely at variance with what those best acquainted with him knew of his character. But when a first passion takes hold of a man of mature age who has dissipated none of the energy of his heart on hobbledehoy attachments, it is apt to possess itself of him with dangerously accumulated force; and, until he had been dazzled by Minna's apparition in his dingy office-parlour, Raymond Lee had never been in love, or fancied himself in love, in his life.

He was obliged to rouse himself somewhat out of his dream of ecstasy as the day wore on, having to perform the duties of a host to his friend Joe Pullyn, who had been asked to dine with him that evening. But when the hour of meeting came, it was soon apparent that he might have been as absent and inattentive as he pleased without being found out, for Joe himself was evidently not in the humour to be observant. In spite of his own preoccupation, Raymond could not help noticing that the poor fellow was woefully out of spirits. The peculiar gloss which usually distinguished him when he was dressed was conspicuously wanting to-day; a general damp was upon him both mentally and externally, and he was altogether silent, flabby, and wretched, as a dispirited bird that has lost its song and all proper pride in its plumage. Raymond felt very sorry for him—the more sorry as he himself was so wondrously glad and jubilant—and, as soon as they found themselves alone after dinner, sounded him gently, in the hope of finding the cause of his dejection removable.

‘Nothing wrong, I hope, Joe? You don’t seem quite yourself to-day.’

This simple expression of sympathy had the effect of bringing out Joe at once. He expanded to Raymond’s

kindness as a budding sun-flower to the sun, only that the sun-flower looks a great deal more cheerful than Joe did when he answered:

‘I’m not myself, Mr. Lee, and that’s the truth of it. Quite the contrary; if it isn’t wicked to say so (for I don’t want to be ungrateful for my blessings), I’m the most miserable fellow breathing.’

Joe put his elbow on the table, and rested his cheek moodily on one hand, while he plaited the table-cloth into minute wrinkles with the other.

‘I am sorry to hear you say that. What’s the matter?’

‘Do you remember what we were speaking about last time I dined here? That’s what the matter is, Mr. Lee. I’ve been and regularly put my foot in it, and all for no good—there’s the worst of all. I must go away, and Amy must stop behind, and very likely we shall both be dead before I come back again. And then we should never be married, you know.’

‘Come, come, Joe, you must try to look at things in a more cheerful light than that.’

But Joe only shook his head dolefully.

‘It isn’t likely a man can be very cheerful when he’s made such a mess of things as I’ve been doing. I’ve been writing to Amy’s sister that I told you of—you seemed to think I ought to—and it isn’t to be believed what trouble it has got me into, and all for nothing. Amy is angry with me—I never saw Amy so put out before; and Amy’s sister is angry with me—if you were only to see the letter she has written back to me. I don’t mind letting you look at it if you like, Mr. Lee, and then you’ll know it can’t have been over-pleasant for a fellow’s feelings. The name is a secret, but I know you’re to be trusted. Here it is, I think.’

He fumbled in his pocket till he had produced a tiny note done up in a pink envelope, which he pushed across the table to Raymond.

‘She needn’t have been quite so haughty with me—upon my word I think she needn’t. For I did try so hard to put it to her gently and delicately and respectfully—that I did; and as I say, it was doing a kindness to her as well as to me and Amy to let her know how her poor old father was fretting after her.’

Raymond did not answer; his eyes were intently riveted on the bit of note-paper which by this time he held open before him. His hand did not shake, and his face was as gravely composed as usual; but it might have been seen by an attentive observer that his lips were very pale.

This was what Amy’s sister wrote:—

*Laurel House, Grove Road,
Tuesday.*

Miss Fanshawe presents her compliments to Mr. Joseph Pullyn, and begs to inform him that she has received the letter which he has thought fit to address to her. Perhaps when he knows this, and learns besides that these lines are the only notice which she intends to take of it, Mr. Pullyn will refrain from troubling Miss Fanshawe with further communications. It may be right to add, with a view of saving time which in Mr. Pullyn’s position ought to be valuable, that all such further communications will be returned unopened.

If Minna had only foreseen, when she had taken so much pains to make this missive freezing and contemptuous, what was to be its effect! To Raymond it was as a thunderbolt falling at his feet. He would have taken refuge in unbelief if he could; would have tried to persuade himself that the

Miss Fanshawe who, as it seemed, was Amy's sister—the girl who preferred fine-ladyism to her old father, and who could be so cold and hard and disdainful—was not his Miss Fanshawe, but another. He knew, however, that there was only one Miss Fanshawe in the house whence this frigid little document was dated, and was compelled to understand that there could be no mistake.

‘Isn't that being hard on a fellow?’ said Joe, whose feelings were evidently quite as much hurt as the writer of the letter could have desired. ‘It was quite bad enough to have vexed Amy so, without having a letter like that shied at one's face like a dab of wet sponge. And Amy *was* vexed, to be sure. You see she's fond of this grand girl somehow—I couldn't be, I know, but Amy's an angel—and she was afraid what I'd done would give offence. She talked of coming over to St. Austin's this morning on purpose to call on her and explain. Poor little pet—if she did, I'll be bound she got black looks enough to frighten her out of her wits, and all through my confounded meddling. A pretty kettle of fish I've made of it indeed!’

Through the tumult of his thoughts Raymond heard these words vaguely and confusedly, much as an uneasy sleeper may hear conversation going on in the same room with him. But as the dreams of sleepers may, unconsciously to themselves, be influenced by words spoken in their hearing, so Raymond now, scarcely knowing whence he derived the materials of the inference, came to the unhesitating conclusion that it was Minna's sister whom he had seen that morning with Minna when he called. He had forgotten all about the unknown damsel from that time to this, but he remembered now that she was a neat pleasant-looking little creature, with a candid face, and a quiet modest bearing which would

never have suggested her to him as being other than a lady. And yet Minna had evidently been ashamed of her. The omission of all ceremony of introduction, of all attempt to include the shy stranger in conversation, had not struck him at the time; but he recollected it now, and the recollection brought conviction with it. Minna had been ashamed of her sister. This was the secret of the unusual constraint of manner which had so perplexed and disappointed him.

The shock of finding the image of Minna—hitherto his ideal of perfection—associated with conduct which his conscience censured as weak and unworthy, was very terrible to him. Yet, in spite of his natural tendency towards severity, he felt wonderfully little angry with her. He was grieved and startled rather than sternly condemnatory. He could not even get up a show of indignation for the purpose of pleasing Joe, who had looked forward to the consolation of hearing Miss Fanshawe's note criticised mercilessly, and who was as much disappointed as surprised when Mr. Lee only handed it back, saying mildly:

‘You must not let your mind dwell on this too much, Joe. Better tear it up and try to forget it.’

Thus discouraged, poor Joe did not dilate further on his grievances that evening, to Raymond's infinite relief. In course of time it came somehow or other to an end, and Raymond was left alone to meditate on the revelation which had made such havoc in his modes of thinking and feeling.

So Minna was not the daughter of the artificial-looking, artificial-feeling woman of the world whom he disliked, of the ponderous one-idea'd man of business whom he despised; she was not of, but only accidentally cast among, the frivolous pleasure-seekers and small-talk-mongers in the midst of whom he had gone with aversion and shrinking in quest

of her. If only the discovery had ended here! But unfortunately, while he had learned that which made Minna externally all that he would have her, he had simultaneously learned that of her character which made her what he would not have had her for all the world. Her origin was what he would have chosen that it should be, but on the other hand, she was herself ashamed of it. For the first time he was compelled to think of her as of a being with faults. And yet—so far was he from feeling the righteous indignation which might have been expected—what affected him most in the knowledge of her faults was not the reprobation with which they made him regard her, but fear of how they might make her regard him. She was ashamed of the poor old father who was pining after her, ashamed of the nice gentle little sister who loved her Good Heavens! what could she think of a son of Walter Lee's?

CHAPTER XVI.

MINNA'S TRIUMPH.

THE hours sped on, and brought with them in due course the momentous evening of the ball. All the preparations had been successfully—nay, triumphantly—completed. The ball-room and reception-rooms had received the final touch of decoration, and were absolutely dazzling in their combination of light and colour, and, more important still, Minna had emerged from the hands of her maid looking, as Mrs. Fanshawe did not scruple to declare, perfectly lovely. But proud as Mrs. Fanshawe was of the splendour of her rooms

and the beauty of her adopted daughter, she did not feel entirely happy for some little time after her guests had begun to assemble. The ball had been got up in order that Lord Fitz-John might be present at it, and until he actually appeared she could not be certain that it was not to turn out a dead failure.

A failure, however, the ball was not to be. A little later than the majority of the company, as befitted his exalted station, Lord Fitz-John arrived, and not only Lord Fitz-John but the Dowager Lady Fitz-John also—an honour which, after the chilling reception bestowed on herself and Minna the other day, Mrs. Fanshawe had hardly dared to count upon. And in truth it would not have been conferred only that Lady Fitz-John, like other mothers more anxious than prudent, had a notion that her presence might tend to keep her son out of mischief. So she had come, looking indeed very grim and stately, and wearing altogether an air of dignified martyrdom most unflattering to a hostess, but there she actually was in the flesh, representing a great incontrovertible fact to be chronicled on the morrow by all the local reporters and commented upon by all the local hangers-on of fashion. Mrs. Fanshawe was overjoyed.

But Mrs. Fanshawe's contentment was not yet shared by Minna. Even when Lord Fitz-John asked her hand for the first dance, and stood at the top of the room with her waiting for the music to strike up, though there is no denying that she was very much pleased, she was still far from being satisfied. The guest who was to her *the* guest of the evening, the guest who had been in her mind while she was dressing—the grand criterion—had not yet arrived, and even the twofold glory of Lord Fitz-John and his mother did not fill up the blank. She knew he would come—he had

promised to come — but why was he so late? Her eyes wandered restlessly hither and thither among the company, more particularly seeking the doorway, and so distracted was she from her proper business that she failed to catch her partner's opening remark to the effect that it was a warm evening, and all but made a mistake in the first figure.

The quadrille was about half over when a sudden bound at her heart warned her that the person she had expected was entering the room.

She was in the midst of an important evolution at the time, and was obliged to withdraw her eyes before his had found her. Nevertheless she observed, by a series of stealthy side-glances, that he made his way round by the wall to a little table standing by itself in a remote corner, where he took his place apart from all others and was soon apparently absorbed in a volume of prints. Minna was now, like Mrs. Fanshawe, wholly satisfied, and for the first time that evening began thoroughly to enjoy herself. Even Lord Fitz-John benefited by an arrival which might have been deemed prejudicial to his interests, for now that all doubt about Raymond's coming was at an end she was able to give her partner a much larger share of her attention than before. She had only one subject of preoccupation left—did Raymond know that it was Lord Fitz-John whom she was dancing with? But never mind—if he did not know the important fact already, he would be sure to find it out. She became all at once lively and smiling, and *piquante* in her replies, so that, before the dance was over, Lord Fitz-John had internally pronounced her a regular fascinating little devil beside whom the other girls in the room were absolutely nowhere.

‘You will enter me to dance the first waltz with you, won't

you?' he asked, when the quadrille was over and they were promenading the room together.

'Let me see, that comes next, I think,' she answered, referring to a little programme she carried in her sash. 'I should be most happy, I am sure, but unfortunately I have promised the first waltz to Captain Lennox. He asked me an hour ago nearly, and of course I could not refuse.'

She would have considered it horribly undignified to vouchsafe to an ordinary cavalier so elaborate an apology for not dancing with him. But the cavalier in the present case was a lord, and so was not ordinary at all.

'Ah! that's a pity. I like waltzing with you; you do it so well. But I suppose it's my own fault for not being here sooner to book you myself. Not that it was my fault either; my mother was so confoundedly long in dressing. It's my belief she wouldn't have been ready now if I had not sent up word to say that if she didn't come at once I would go without her. I knew that would frighten her—ha! ha! ha!'

The joke seemed to tickle his lordship's fancy amazingly, but, not knowing enough of the circumstances to see the point of it, Minna did not respond except by a faint smile. A very faint smile, and rather absent-looking too, for at the moment she was engaged in wondering why Raymond Lee, whom she had just passed so close that her dress almost touched him, had let her go by without once raising his eyes from the engraving he was poring over. He had been in a brown study, no doubt, but then there are some occasions on which people have no business to be in brown studies.

'Well, Miss Fanshawe,' went on his lordship, intent on getting as much amusement as possible out of his evening,

‘you have entered Captain Lennox for the next, but you will enter me for the next again, I hope. Come, you can’t refuse that?’

‘For the Lancers, you mean? Oh certainly, with a great deal of pleasure. I am so fond of the Lancers.’

‘And before anybody else gets hold of you you’ll promise to let me take you in to supper, eh? It spoils five per cent of the pleasure of supper to get stuck beside some scraggy old girl you are wishing all the time at the bottom of the sea.’

If she had thought about it, she might have had a notion that a man would not talk in this fashion to a lady whom he regarded quite as his own equal; but though she would have resented so liberal a use of slang in any other partner, she did not resent it in this one.

‘Oh Lord Fitz-John! Well, in that case I suppose I must promise—anything rather than let you form so uncharitable a wish as that.’

She laughed, and looked, as she felt, very much elated. And yet all the time she was a little disappointed too. She had been thinking that Raymond, who had told her that he never danced, would probably make a point of taking her in to supper.

‘Very well, that is settled then. Will you sit down here?’

The place thus chosen for her was in full view of Raymond Lee’s corner, and she felt grateful to the chooser as she took it. Raymond could not fail to see her now—could not fail to come over and speak to her. He need not be afraid of interrupting Lord Fitz-John, for Lord Fitz-John, though still standing near her, seemed to have exhausted his conversational resources for the present, and was whol-

ly occupied with caressing his moustache and looking about him.

But still Raymond made no sign; never even, so far as she could see, turning his head towards where she sat. She felt very much surprised and disappointed. It was doubtless because he thought she was engaged in conversation with Lord Fitz-John, though surely this was carrying deference to a most absurd extent. She was very proud of having the young nobleman so long at her side, and yet now she began to wish that he would go away.

He did go away presently, being carried off by Mrs. Fanshawe to be introduced to a very plain young lady with whom that sagacious matron judged that he might be safely trusted; and Minna's heart beat high with expectation. *Now* Raymond would certainly come to her, as certainly as she was sitting there, virtually alone, waiting for him.

No, Raymond did not come. One minute passed, and then another, and he was still turning and re-turning the leaves of that stupid book. What in the world did he mean by it? Was it possible he did not see her?—but that seemed out of the question. Or could it be that he was offended with her for receiving so much of Lord Fitz-John's homage? In that case what a tyrannical unreasonable creature he must be! The very idea made Minna feel quite hot. While she was still speculating, the music of the waltz struck up, and a young military dandy, who was Captain Lennox, approached to claim his partner. Minna rose and let herself be whirled off by him, smiling, and to all appearance in a state of high contentment, but with a pang at her heart, half of indignation, half of perplexity, that made each smile an effort. If Mr. Lee would not speak to her, why had he come at all?

Why had he come at all? This was the very question

which Raymond was asking of himself at the same moment.

He had not raised his head from his book since first he had taken up his station, but he had been secretly watching her all the time notwithstanding. He had never seen her dance before, and the sight caused the idea of winning her for himself to appear more incongruously extravagant than ever. To see her fluttering about the room in her light gauzy drapery—a butterfly in its native element—made him feel himself the most miserably self-blinded and self-deceived of mortals for imagining that their lives could ever be in common. She looked so happy, so radiant, so thoroughly at home surrounded by all that glittering garishness which he detested—in the midst of which he felt, and felt that he must appear to her, absurdly and irreconcilably out of place. And then he knew now that her pleasure in these scenes, and among these people so utterly repugnant to him, was as genuine as it seemed to be. She had chosen her way of life willingly and deliberately, in opposition to the manifest claims of duty and natural affection, in preference to the love of a father and a sister. How was it possible that the girl who was dancing yonder, in a cloud of lace, and blonde, and sweet perfumes, when she ought to have been helping her sister to mend her father's stockings in the farmhouse kitchen—how was it possible that she could ever listen to the love of one so grave and homely and plain-speaking as himself, unless indeed to extract from it a moment's passing amusement? She was as far divided from him as the moon from the child who cries for it—as far divided from him as she was from the father and sister whom she despised. Fool that he had been ever to think of her—double-dyed fool to let the recollection of her siren invi-

tation bring him to the ball that night to swell her triumph, in defiance of his better judgment, which after what he had learned yesterday, warned him to avoid her. So angry was he with himself that, for the first time since he had known her, he felt angry with Minna too.

Captain Lennox was a good dancer, and Minna enjoyed her waltz very much—would have enjoyed it, that is, if, whenever it brought her near Raymond, she had not seen him still sitting with downward-turned face and steadily averted eyes. Each time she passed him she found him always the same, and each time she grew more wondering and perplexed. At length, when the dance had already lasted several minutes, her suspense became too much for her, and she suddenly took a bold resolution which she put into execution the very next time she found herself approaching Raymond.

‘Oh! if you please, Captain Lennox, I am afraid I am getting giddy.’

The gallant captain’s practised arm brought her up directly.

‘Giddy! you don’t mean that. Will you sit down?’

‘I think I must, if you please. How very stupid of me! Oh! Mr. Lee, I am taking your seat, am I not? very kind of you, really. Oh! it is nothing, thank you—it is only that I am a little giddy and out of breath;’ and indeed this was true now. ‘And how long have you been here, Mr. Lee?’

Hypocritical Minna!

‘Oh! I don’t know. Not half an hour yet, I suppose. Time always drags with me in a place like this.’

The speech was not polite, but Raymond was not in a polite humour.

‘You have not been dancing yet then?’

‘No, I never dance.’

‘Dear me, how strange! O! Captain Lennox, how selfish I am to keep you waiting on me in this manner! You must join in that delightful waltz again, really. I wish I could too, for you know how fond I am of it, but I must not venture again this time. Suppose you go and ask Miss Wilson? She has not danced yet, I think; it will be quite a charity.’

The captain could not resist such an appeal, and went off to perform his mission, looking, however, not very well pleased with it. But Miss Wilson was not destined to profit by Minna’s benevolent consideration, for before the captain could reach her there was a general lull among the dancers, of which the musicians took advantage to play the concluding chords of the finale. The waltz was ended, and was no more to be resuscitated—the company dispersing themselves over the room at the discretion of the gentlemen, some of whom, preferring to retain their partners, promenaded it in the discussion of soft nothings, while others, desirous of emancipation for themselves, were politely anxious to find seats for the ladies.

Among the latter was Lord Fitz-John, who, having with the least possible delay disembarrassed himself of the ineligible young lady with whom Mrs. Fanshawe had so discreetly provided him, hastened to claim Minna’s promise for the next dance.

‘You have not forgot you are booked to me for the Lancers, I hope, Mis Fanshawe,’ he said, coming up to the little table where she sat with Raymond standing by her side. ‘Suppose we make sure of our places now?’

Minna found the suggestion singularly inopportune. Why, she had only just succeeded in settling herself beside Mr. Lee

when here she was asked to break off the conversation ere it was well begun. She hesitated a moment, and then answered:

‘Oh, Lord Fitz-John’ (the name pronounced very audibly), ‘I am extremely sorry, but I must beg you to excuse me this time. That waltz has quite knocked me up; I must really rest a little before dancing again.’

‘Oh indeed! that’s awkward,’ said his lordship, turning on his heel instantly with a suppressed whistle. This was the first time that a young lady had ever pleaded fatigue as an excuse for not dancing with him, and he did not find the sensation agreeable. ‘Confound the girl, what does she mean by it?’ he thought as he walked off. ‘It looks almost as if she was in love with that fellow there that she won’t leave him. Damned impertinent little hussy, she don’t get hold of me again in a hurry.’

If Raymond Lee could only have looked into Lord Fitz-John’s mind just then, and seen what construction Minna’s conduct was capable of bearing! But so ungratefully dull was he of comprehension, that it never occurred to him to think that she had made a sacrifice in sending away that heavy-eyed thick-lipped young man.

Minna hardly realised the extent of the sacrifice herself, so pleased she was to have secured an interval for undisturbed conversation with Mr. Lee.

‘I wonder you don’t dance,’ she resumed, turning towards him again. ‘It is so delightful.’

Another proof of the frivolity and love of pleasure which opposed an insurmountable barrier to his hopes!

‘Is it? My taste is not so good—or so bad—as to find it so.’

‘Perhaps that’s because you don’t try, Mr. Lee.’

If he had asked her to dance with him at that moment, she would probably have stood up with him in sheer forgetfulness of what Lord Fitz-John would think.

‘It is true that I don’t try. I detest it too much for that.’

‘Detest it! Oh dear! what strong language! Then I am afraid a dancing-party must be a terrible affliction to you.’

Her petulance was beginning to array itself in arms against his sternness. But then she was only fencing in fun, and he was parrying in earnest.

‘You are quite right. I hate parties, and ought to have nothing to do with them.’

‘And I love them,’ she answered, shaking her head wilfully. ‘And as for dancing, why I positively adore it.’

Poor Minna! she thought they had got up such a pretty little quarrel!

He looked at her bitterly for a few seconds. What a fool he had been, to be sure!

‘Well, Miss Fanshawe, I will leave you in possession of the field,’ he said, with an effort at carelessness. ‘It is time for me to be going now.’

‘Going!’ repeated Minna, hardly believing her ears. ‘Why, we shall not have supper for an hour and more.’

‘Ah! but you see I keep early hours, Miss Fanshawe. By the time you are at supper I shall probably be asleep.’ (Asleep! what a mockery!) ‘Good evening; you must really excuse me.’

‘Oh! of course we would not detain you for the world. Good evening, Mr. Lee.’

They shook hands coldly, and in a moment more Raymond was making his way round the dancers towards the door. Minna looked after him as he went, and felt almost as if she hated him. Almost—not quite; or surely she would not

thus: 'Why does he not make haste to speak before I am carried off by another?' and she knew further that the 'he' stood to represent Raymond Lee.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT MINNA DID WITH THE BOUQUET.

BUT Raymond Lee, unfortunately not knowing what reason there was for making haste, and fearing above all things to mar a possible chance by over-precipitation, still deferred the decisive moment.

Day followed day, week followed week, and all that Minna knew certainly was that, whereas formerly he had never shown himself at places of fashionable resort, she now met him in public frequently, always by himself, and always apparently indifferent to what interested the crowd around him. She had her own theory as to what was the probable cause of so abrupt a change in his habits, and her own fancies about the expression of his eyes when they rested upon her; but all this was mere speculation, founded on very imperfect observation. For except in public she had no opportunity at this time of seeing him. Mrs. Fanshawe still abstained from asking Mr. Lee to spend another friendly evening with them; and Minna, though pondering much over the omission, had not yet found courage to make any suggestion on the subject. In the meantime it was something to her that he had received and accepted an invitation for the grand ball which Mrs. Fanshawe had lost no time in organizing, and at which Lord Fitz-John and his mother were expected to be present. To this festivity

Minna looked forward with strangely conflicting feelings, hardly knowing whether she most desired or dreaded its approach.

Desired or dreaded, the momentous date drew near and nearer, and at last the day arrived preceding that fixed for the ball. In the forenoon of this day Minna received two very unexpected visits. Mrs. Fanhawe had gone out to give some final orders with reference to the entertainment of the following evening, while Miss Fanshawe remained at home busy with the fabrication of a contemptuous little note in the third person, which, short as it was, she had some trouble in making as contemptuous as she wished. Scarcely had this missive been sealed and handed to a servant to post, when Minna, just settling herself down to an hour's quiet embroidery, was disturbed by her maid entering the neat little boudoir to say:

‘If you please, miss, there’s a young pers—a young lady downstairs who wants particularly to see you. John said he didn’t know if you were at home.’

‘A young lady! Who is it?’

‘She wouldn’t give her name, miss. She said you would be sure to know who it was when you heard she wanted to see you. I was thinking,’ continued the woman respectfully, seeing that her mistress still looked perplexed, ‘that perhaps it is the same young lady you told us of who was to be shown straight into your room.’

Minna gave a little start—she had evidently forgotten all about Amy’s promised visit—but, recovering herself, said with a dignified iciness which lowered the maid’s opinion of the unknown young person more than even the unfashionable cloak and dowdy bonnet in which she had come arrayed:

‘Tell the young lady I am ready to see her.’

And then she folded her hands with great stateliness, and majestically awaited the appearance of the visitor.

Surely something must have happened to alter Minna's feelings towards her sister very considerably since their last parting.

Amy was shown in, and the door was shut upon her, but even then Minna did not become much more cordial.

‘How do you do? Pray sit down.’

Amy did not seem surprised at the frigidity of her welcome, nor indeed to have expected anything different. She sat down as she was told, and, after what appeared a painful pause, began:

‘Joe was at our house last night, and told me that he had been writing to you.’

‘Oh indeed! Then he told you of a very unwarrantable liberty he had been taking. There has been nothing in our acquaintance—if acquaintance it can be called—which could justify him in attempting to lecture me on my duties, or, for that matter, in addressing me at all. I hope he will understand from my reply that I expect to be troubled no further on the subject.’

She spoke these words with an air which was, and was meant to be, as severely grand as possible, for she fancied that Amy had come to second Joe's appeal, and she was determined to let her see beforehand the futility of all attempts at aggression. But, somewhat to her embarrassment, Amy did not carry herself aggressively at all, and, clasping her little hands together, went on in tones of humble entreaty and deprecation which took Minna quite by surprise.

‘I have come to say how very sorry I am that it should have happened. It was very foolish of Joe, and I have told

him so, but I hope you will look it over—for my sake, you know. For indeed, indeed, it was not my fault. I had no idea he ever thought of doing such a thing till he told me last night, and I am sure neither had father.'

'Oh! as for that, I never suspected my father of having anything to do with it,' replied Minna, with a touch of bitterness showing through her dignity. 'After what has passed, it was impossible to suppose that he could be so extremely desirous to have me near him as Mr. Pullyn's lively imagination represented. It seems to me that Mr. Pullyn has taken a liberty with my father as well as myself,' she added, relapsing into severity.

'It was a very great liberty,' said Amy penitently. 'But I am sure I have made him see that he has done wrong, and you will look it over, won't you? And you will believe that I had nothing to do with it, please, for upon my word I had not—I never thought of asking anything so unreasonable of you for a moment. Please look it over, dear Minnie; I cannot bear that you should be offended with us.'

Minna's heart was not made of stone, and the spectacle of shy little Amy's distress fairly melted it.

'Dear, dear Amy, don't say another word about it, and I promise you I'll never think of it again. I am only sorry I was in such a hurry to send away my answer to Mr. Pullyn's foolish letter, but it won't do him any harm, and next time you see him you can tell him to tear it up, as I will tear up what he wrote me, and all shall be as though nothing of the kind had happened.'

But sometimes it is not so easy to annul the consequences of a rash act as Minna seemed to imagine.

'Kiss me, Amy, and we'll say no more about it. Now take off your bonnet, dear, and let us begin to enjoy ourselves

Nonsense, I won't have any excuses—you are going to spend the whole afternoon with me, and nothing less will serve. Do you hear me? take off your bonnet directly.'

Her pretty imperiousness was quite irresistible, and Amy had nothing for it but to do as she was bid, looking, however, so shy and frightened that Minna thought it necessary to reassure her.

'Oh! there is nothing to be afraid of, I can promise you, unless it is me, and I am not so very formidable a person, I hope. Nobody will dare to intrude upon us here, and here we will stop all day, and have luncheon brought to us, and be very cosy and happy. In this room you are under my roof; it is my boudoir, and held specially sacred to me.'

Amy looked reverentially round, for the first time taking note of the grandeur about her, which hitherto had only vaguely impressed her with a general sense of awe.

'Is it indeed? It is very beautiful.'

And she thought with amazement of the condescension which her sister had shown in occupying that poor little bedroom at Black Moor Farm which was all she had been able to offer her.

'It is rather a pretty room, I think,' said Minna complacently—'all fitted up according to my own taste, you know. And yonder is my bedroom leading out of it, and beyond that again my dressing-room. Would you like to come and look at them, dear? and then you will know all about me and my local habitation.'

She thought she would be doing a very hospitable thing in entertaining her sister with an exhibition of her belongings, but in truth it was pleasant for herself to have some one to show them to who was so fresh to splendour of all kinds as Amy.

‘I should like it very much, please,’ said Amy timidly, following her sister into the next room. ‘Oh dear! how very fine everything is!’

‘There is my bed, you see, in that recess—a neat little concern, is it not? How do you like the colour of the curtains? And there is my book-case with all my pet books in it and my pet statuettes on the top.’

‘I never saw anything half so beautiful,’ said Amy, looking round with unconcealed wonder and admiration.

Minna was not surprised at the remark, and yet could not help being pleased.

‘I am glad you like my snugery, dear. I think it really is rather a nice one.’

‘It is indeed,’ fervently assented Amy, averting her eyes nervously from her own shabby little figure incongruously reflected in a gilt looking-glass. ‘And that is your dressing-table, I suppose—how handsome it is, and what beautiful scent-bottles these are! And oh! what a magnificent nose-gay!’

‘Very fine flowers, are they not? Lord Fitz-John cut them for me the other day,’ replied Minna with an assumed carelessness which was in reality (though she did not know it) the rankest ostentation. For if she intended anything by it, she intended Amy to conclude that receiving a bouquet from a lord was an every-day occurrence which she thought nothing of.

Ostentation notwithstanding, Minna’s account of how she came by the flowers was strictly true. She and Mrs. Fanshawe, driving near Fitz-John Park the week before, had been met by his lordship, who had insisted that they should enter and see his mother. He remembered with some resentment that when they had called a few days previously

to pay her their respects after the *fête*, she had chosen not to be at home; and he could not neglect so good an opportunity of circumventing and annoying her. As might have been expected, her reception of the visitors was not very gracious, and, as might also have been expected, her son was in consequence more demonstrative than ever in his attention to them, or at least to one of them. He talked to Minna perseveringly the whole time, and, when she admired some cut flowers ornamenting the table, would not be satisfied till she and Mrs. Fanshawe had accompanied him to the conservatory, where he stripped more than one of his mother's favourite plants to make the bouquet which Amy now admired. So that Minna might well feel a little proud of it and the lordly homage it represented.

On hearing so grand a name so familiarly pronounced, Amy appeared very properly impressed.

'Lord Fitz-John!' she repeated in tones of respectful surprise exceedingly agreeable to Minna. 'You know Lord Fitz-John very well then?'

'Oh yes! we know him, of course,' said Minna, still struggling to keep up her assumption of carelessness. 'He and his mother are coming to our house to-morrow; we are going to have a ball.'

'Indeed! I suppose it is to be very grand.'

'Well, I don't know about that. Everything will be very nice of course. Would you like to see my new dress?'—the instinct of feminine nature was too strong for her here, and her manner became animated again. 'It came home last night, and it does look so well. This way, dear, it is hanging up in the dressing-room.'

Amy went into the dressing-room, and was struck dumb by the splendour of the fabric there displayed to her.

‘It is a beauty, is it not?’ asked Minna delightedly.

‘It seems almost too good to wear,’ murmured Amy.

‘Ah! but it was made to wear,’ rejoined Minna more philosophically.

‘How very beautiful you will look in it!’ said Amy thoughtfully, gazing first at the dress, and then at her sister, as though trying to realise the effect of a combination.

‘You little flatterer! Well, perhaps I shan’t be quite a fright. And then I am to have a beautiful head dress of lilies and forget-me-nots—it has not come home yet, or I would let you see it. Blue and white are the colours that become me best, you know. Oh yes! I think I shall look tolerably well.’

‘I am sure of it,’ said Amy earnestly.

‘The drawing-rooms are to be festooned with blue and white on purpose,’ went on Minna, getting more and more communicative as she found how appreciative a listener she had to do with. ‘We have tried the effect this morning in the little drawing-room, and it looks so nice, you can’t think. Suppose you come and take a peep; there is nobody downstairs just now; mamma—Aunt Fanshawe—isn’t back yet, I know. Come, I really should like you to see, and then to-morrow night you will be able to picture everything to yourself quite exactly.’

‘I should like it too,’ said Amy wistfully. ‘If only you are sure Aunt Fanshawe is not at home.’

‘Oh! I am quite sure, dear. Come along.’

And, lightly tripping, she led the way downstairs.

‘What a handsome staircase!’ commented Amy.

‘Ah! is it? Yes, well enough,’ said Minna almost surprised at the observation, for she had always taken the staircase for granted. ‘It will look very different to-morrow night, you

know, lighted and done up with evergreens. This way, dear; what we call the little drawing-room is on this side.'

'It's like a palace!' exclaimed Amy with a long breath, as the vision of the little drawing-room—with chalked floor, and doorways hung with blue and white drapery, and flower-wreathed mirrors and chandeliers—burst upon her astonished view. 'I never saw anything like it in my life. What splendid looking-glasses, to be sure! And oh dear! what tall windows!—I should think you were always afraid of an accident with so much glass.'

'We should only have to get it mended again, you know,' said Minna, feeling a little amused at her sister's delicious *naïveté*. 'These windows open on the garden, you see, they are very convenient.'

'So they are. What a beautiful garden you have got!'

'It is larger than you can see from here; it goes quite round the house. Will you step out and look at it? we can go in again by the back way.'

She threw the folding leaf of the window open as she spoke, and stepped on to the terrace of turf running outside.

But no sooner had she done this than she started violently, and came to an abrupt stop. The garden-gate, left ajar by a careless servant, was being pushed open by a hand from without; and, quick as lightning, the idea of that little country-girl and herself being caught together by visitors flashed across Minna's mind in all its horror. It was too late, however, to retreat now. Already the gate had been opened, and a tall figure appeared coming up the garden towards the house. And no sooner was Minna aware of the tall figure than she was aware also, almost without looking, that it was Raymond Lee's.

She was very much surprised, so much surprised that for a moment she nearly forgot the awkwardness of Amy's presence, and—no doubt from surprise too—found herself all at once strangely tremulous.

He seemed to discover her almost as instantaneously as she had recognised him, and, leaving the gravelled way immediately, struck across the lawn towards the window of the little drawing-room. In another moment they had shaken hands.

'Pray step inside, Mr. Lee,' said Minna nervously, when, hardly knowing how, she had got through the first formalities of greeting. 'Mamma is out just now, but I do not think she will be long.'

She turned back into the room. Amy had been standing close behind her, and was now observed for the first time by Raymond, who silently inclined his head to her as he entered. But even on this, Minna made no attempt to introduce her.

Minna was now in terrible embarrassment. She did not know what to do—not even whether to ask Raymond to sit down. If he sat down, she must sit down too; and it was manifestly out of the question that they should both be seated while Amy was standing. It might have seemed easy to offer Amy a chair also, but to Minna this solution of the difficulty was very undesirable. For Amy's sitting down would have destroyed any illusion that Raymond might peradventure entertain as to her being a young person sent by the upholsterer to assist in the decorations; and Minna did not wish such an illusion to be destroyed. It was very cowardly of her, and she knew it, and resolved that as soon as they were alone she would make Amy a handsome present out of her jewel-case. In the meanwhile, she did not give

her poor little sister so much as a look, and Amy, feeling dreadfully confused, shrank behind her once more, and glanced anxiously towards the door.

‘I must apologise for this intrusion, Miss Fanshawe,’ began Raymond, looking and feeling at least as much embarrassed as the other two. ‘But I think I heard Mrs. Fanshawe say the other day that she would like to be at the launch of the *Ulysses*.’

‘I know mamma wanted to go,’ faltered Minna. ‘But papa was too late in applying, and there were no tickets left.’

‘I have just received a contractor’s order,’ said Raymond eagerly (he did not add that it had been sent him in answer to a very urgent application.) ‘And I have come to say that it is quite at your disposal—and Mrs. Fanshawe’s. I am sorry the notice is so short, but it is not twelve yet, and if you are there by one o’clock you will be in time.’

Minna’s heart leapt high at the prospect of spending an afternoon in Raymond’s company; for of course he would go if they went—would probably indeed escort them. But immediately afterwards it sank again. How could she treat Amy with such rudeness as to leave her after making her promise to stay for the afternoon? And then, supposing this difficulty overcome, Mrs. Fanshawe was not at home, and Minna would have been afraid of taking on herself the responsibility of accepting Raymond’s civility. She had an instinct that her mamma rather wanted to keep Mr. Lee at arm’s length for the present.

‘You are very good,’ she said in a low voice. ‘But—but—I am particularly engaged at home this afternoon.’

She glanced uncomfortably round, hoping that Amy

would not betray what the detaining cause was. But Amy was no longer in the room, having watched her opportunity to edge towards the door and slip out unobserved. For the first time in her life, Minna was alone with Mr. Lee, and the discovery did not diminish her embarrassment.

Without being told, Raymond appeared to understand that the stranger had something to do with the pleaded engagement, for he went on to argue:

‘The order does not put any limit on numbers. Your friend—the young lady—can accompany you if you like.’

Minna’s opinion of Amy was considerably raised by the discovery that Raymond, less observant of unfashionable dress-making than the acute lady’s maid, had taken her for a young lady after all. But still she had no choice except to refuse; in spite of Raymond’s liberality of judgment, she would not have been seen in public with Amy for all the world.

‘My friend is staying to luncheon with me’—she was not ashamed of mentioning this little fact since Amy had received Mr. Lee’s endorsement. ‘And she would be too tired for sight-seeing, I am sure; she comes from a great distance.’

Raymond looked disappointed—as in truth he was, more by the visible constraint of Minna’s manner than by her refusal of the order.

‘You will not be able to go then?’

‘We shall not indeed. I am very sorry,’ she added quickly, fearing that she might have offended him.

But he was not offended, only disappointed and disheartened.

They both stood still a moment, rather sadly and very awkwardly (Minna’s wonted *savoir-faire* had all evaporated to-day), and then Raymond said:

‘I must not stay longer now; I am keeping you from your friend.’

‘Will you not wait to see mamma?’ she asked tremulously.

‘Not to-day. Good-bye, Miss Fanshawe.’

‘Good-bye. We shall see you to-morrow evening?’

He had just been thinking to himself that he would never come again—the pain was greater than the pleasure—and was a little staggered by the question.

‘Perhaps it would be better for me to make my excuses,’ he said after a pause. ‘The truth is I had no right to accept Mrs. Fanshawe’s invitation. I don’t dance, and have no business at balls.’

A sudden terror quivered through Minna’s heart; Raymond was vexed with her, and was going to leave her for ever.

‘Oh! but you will come!’ she cried hastily. And in her voice was a ring of supplication which she detected directly after the words were spoken, and the consciousness of which made her colour come and go rapidly.

Raymond must have detected it too, for she felt his eyes on her face instantly.

‘Do you care for my coming, then?’ she heard him say in low earnest tones.

She could not speak; she was almost choked by the tumultuous beating of her heart, and her colour came and went more rapidly than ever.

As for Raymond, a hope had seized him which seemed to make his blood turn to fire within his veins. The moment he had so long looked for, so often well-nigh despaired of, had surely come.

He took her hand, and she made no attempt to withdraw it.

But just as he was about to speak the words which rose straight from his heart to his lips, the sound of wheels was heard without; and, looking round, Raymond and Minna both saw through the open window Mrs. Fanshawe's carriage, with Mrs. Fanshawe in it, rolling up the drive. Mrs. Fanshawe saw them too, and, though looking decidedly surprised at first, recovered herself sufficiently to smile and nod graciously.

Minna's mother though he deemed her, Raymond had never succeeded in liking Mrs. Fanshawe, and her advent at this moment jarred upon him as something antipathetic and discordant. He let Minna's hand go, and the passionate words that had been hovering on his lips resolved themselves into a tame

‘Good-bye, Miss Fanshawe.’

But Minna knew very well that when he had taken her hand he had meant more than only to say good-bye. And, knowing this, she wished with all her heart that something had occurred to detain her mamma a few minutes longer.

Mrs. Fanshawe entered the room immediately afterwards, for she was not willing that so dangerous a *tête-à-tête* should be prolonged. She was a good deal relieved to find Raymond on the point of leaving, and still more so when he explained that he had called with an order for viewing the launch, of which he understood that an engagement would prevent Mrs. and Miss Fanshawe from availing themselves. On discovering that Minna had been so prudent, Mrs. Fanshawe felt that she could afford to be cordial, and thanked Raymond very warmly for his courtesy.

‘So very kind of you, Mr. Lee—really so excessively kind.’

I am particularly sorry that—a—hem—a prior engagement What! are you really going so soon? that is too bad. Well, to-morrow we shall have the pleasure of seeing you again?’

This time Raymond made no objection on the score of not dancing.

‘I shall certainly come,’ was his answer, and Minna noted it with internal satisfaction.

When Raymond was gone, Mrs. Fanshawe praised Minna for her discretion.

‘You were quite right to say we were engaged, my love. We have a great many things to do just now, it would have been very inconvenient to give up so much time.’

‘But I really was engaged, mamma,’ said Minna.

The theory that she had made a false excuse to Raymond was singularly distasteful to her. And then she explained how Amy had come to see her and was at that moment in the house.

Mrs. Fanshawe received the news rather ungraciously, but did not oppose Minna’s entertaining her sister for that afternoon if she chose, and Minna accordingly went upstairs to rejoin her guest, whom she found demurely sitting in the bedroom contemplating the bouquet on the toilet-table.

‘I owe you a great many apologies, Amy dear. I hope you have not been very dull sitting all this time by yourself.’

‘Oh no! thank you, I have had so many pretty things to look at, you know. Can you tell me the name of this beau-ti-ful flower? I have been admiring it so very much.’

Minna took up the bouquet carelessly.

‘Really I can’t, dear. I’m not a bit of a botanist. But here it is for you if you like.’

And, thus speaking, she drew forth the flower to which her sister had called attention—the largest and finest of the bunch.

‘Oh Minnie! to spoil your beautiful nosegay like that! I am so sorry!’ said Amy remorsefully.

‘Sorry! what are you sorry for? Why, you don’t think I mind about spoiling it, do you? The great stupid thing; it is a week old nearly—not fit to be kept a day longer. Pah! it is getting quite unpleasant!’

And with these words Lord Fitz-John’s bouquet was tossed contemptuously out of the window. Yet only that morning Minna had trimmed the stalks carefully and changed the water with her own hands.

CHAPTER XV.

AN UNPLEASANT SURPRISE FOR RAYMOND.

RAYMOND left Minna’s presence that day in a kind of waking trance.

He seemed to be living and moving in an enchanted atmosphere of his own, through which nothing was visible save Minna’s bright face mantling with conscious blushes, and nothing audible save Minna’s persuasive voice saying, ‘Oh! but you will come.’ He was so happy that he could scarcely believe in his own happiness, and yet his recollections of that face and that voice assurred him that it was real. And with this assurance came a feverish longing to see her again, to speak the words he had been going to speak when he took her hand, and to hear from her lips the answer. He determined that at the ball of the next evening he would seek her and tell her plainly of his love; and to

the ball he looked forward with a wild impatience strangely at variance with what those best acquainted with him knew of his character. But when a first passion takes hold of a man of mature age who has dissipated none of the energy of his heart on hobbledehoy attachments, it is apt to possess itself of him with dangerously accumulated force; and, until he had been dazzled by Minna's apparition in his dingy office-parlour, Raymond Lee had never been in love, or fancied himself in love, in his life.

He was obliged to rouse himself somewhat out of his dream of ecstasy as the day wore on, having to perform the duties of a host to his friend Joe Pullyn who had been asked to dine with him that evening. But when the hour of meeting came, it was soon apparent that he might have been as absent and inattentive as he pleased without being found out, for Joe himself was evidently not in the humour to be observant. In spite of his own preoccupation, Raymond could not help noticing that the poor fellow was woefully out of spirits. The peculiar gloss which usually distinguished him when he was dressed was conspicuously wanting to-day; a general damp was upon him both mentally and externally, and he was altogether silent, flabby, and wretched, as a dispirited bird that has lost its song and all proper pride in its plumage. Raymond felt very sorry for him—the more sorry as he himself was so wondrously glad and jubilant—and, as soon as they found themselves alone after dinner, sounded him gently, in the hope of finding the cause of his dejection removable.

‘Nothing wrong, I hope, Joe? You don’t seem quite yourself to-day.’

This simple expression of sympathy had the effect of bringing out Joe at once. He expanded to Raymond’s

kindness as a budding sun-flower to the sun, only that the sun-flower looks a great deal more cheerful than Joe did when he answered:

‘I’m not myself, Mr. Lee, and that’s the truth of it. Quite the contrary; if it isn’t wicked to say so (for I don’t want to be ungrateful for my blessings), I’m the most miserable fellow breathing.’

Joe put his elbow on the table, and rested his cheek moodily on one hand, while he plaited the table-cloth into minute wrinkles with the other.

‘I am sorry to hear you say that. What’s the matter?’

‘Do you remember what we were speaking about last time I dined here? That’s what the matter is, Mr. Lee. I’ve been and regularly put my foot in it, and all for no good—there’s the worst of all. I must go away, and Amy must stop behind, and very likely we shall both be dead before I come back again. And then we should never be married, you know.’

‘Come, come, Joe, you must try to look at things in a more cheerful light than that.’

But Joe only shook his head dolefully.

‘It isn’t likely a man can be very cheerful when he’s made such a mess of things as I’ve been doing. I’ve been writing to Amy’s sister that I told you of—you seemed to think I ought to—and it isn’t to be believed what trouble it has got me into, and all for nothing. Amy is angry with me—I never saw Amy so put out before; and Amy’s sister is angry with me—if you were only to see the letter she has written back to me. I don’t mind letting you look at it if you like, Mr. Lee, and then you’ll know it can’t have been over-pleasant for a fellow’s feelings. The name is a secret, but I know you’re to be trusted. Here it is, I think.’

He fumbled in his pocket till he had produced a tiny note done up in a pink envelope, which he pushed across the table to Raymond.

‘She needn’t have been quite so haughty with me—upon my word I think she needn’t. For I did try so hard to put it to her gently and delicately and respectfully—that I did; and as I say, it was doing a kindness to her as well as to me and Amy to let her know how her poor old father was fretting after her.’

Raymond did not answer; his eyes were intently riveted on the bit of note-paper which by this time he held open before him. His hand did not shake, and his face was as gravely composed as usual; but it might have been seen by an attentive observer that his lips were very pale.

This was what Amy’s sister wrote:—

*Laurel House, Grove Road,
Tuesday.*

Miss Fanshawe presents her compliments to Mr. Joseph Pullyn, and begs to inform him that she has received the letter which he has thought fit to address to her. Perhaps when he knows this, and learns besides that these lines are the only notice which she intends to take of it, Mr. Pullyn will refrain from troubling Miss Fanshawe with further communications. It may be right to add, with a view of saving time which in Mr. Pullyn’s position ought to be valuable, that all such further communications will be returned unopened.

If Minna had only foreseen, when she had taken so much pains to make this missive freezing and contemptuous, what was to be its effect! To Raymond it was as a thunderbolt falling at his feet. He would have taken refuge in unbelief if he could; would have tried to persuade himself that the

Miss Fanshawe who, as it seemed, was Amy's sister—the girl who preferred fine-ladyism to her old father, and who could be so cold and hard and disdainful—was not his Miss Fanshawe, but another. He knew, however, that there was only one Miss Fanshawe in the house whence this frigid little document was dated, and was compelled to understand that there could be no mistake.

'Isn't that being hard on a fellow?' said Joe, whose feelings were evidently quite as much hurt as the writer of the letter could have desired. 'It was quite bad enough to have vexed Amy so, without having a letter like that shied at one's face like a dab of wet sponge. And Amy *was* vexed, to be sure. You see she's fond of this grand girl somehow—I couldn't be, I know, but Amy's an angel—and she was afraid what I'd done would give offence. She talked of coming over to St. Austin's this morning on purpose to call on her and explain. Poor little pet—if she did, I'll be bound she got black looks enough to frighten her out of her wits, and all through my confounded meddling. A pretty kettle of fish I've made of it indeed!'

Through the tumult of his thoughts Raymond heard these words vaguely and confusedly, much as an uneasy sleeper may hear conversation going on in the same room with him. But as the dreams of sleepers may, unconsciously to themselves, be influenced by words spoken in their hearing, so Raymond now, scarcely knowing whence he derived the materials of the inference, came to the unhesitating conclusion that it was Minna's sister whom he had seen that morning with Minna when he called. He had forgotten all about the unknown damsel from that time to this, but he remembered now that she was a neat pleasant-looking little creature, with a candid face, and a quiet modest bearing which would

never have suggested her to him as being other than a lady. And yet Minna had evidently been ashamed of her. The omission of all ceremony of introduction, of all attempt to include the shy stranger in conversation, had not struck him at the time; but he recollected it now, and the recollection brought conviction with it. Minna had been ashamed of her sister. This was the secret of the unusual constraint of manner which had so perplexed and disappointed him.

The shock of finding the image of Minna—hitherto his ideal of perfection—associated with conduct which his conscience censured as weak and unworthy, was very terrible to him. Yet, in spite of his natural tendency towards severity, he felt wonderfully little angry with her. He was grieved and startled rather than sternly condemnatory. He could not even get up a show of indignation for the purpose of pleasing Joe, who had looked forward to the consolation of hearing Miss Fanshawe's note criticised mercilessly, and who was as much disappointed as surprised when Mr. Lee only handed it back, saying mildly:

‘You must not let your mind dwell on this too much, Joe. Better tear it up and try to forget it.’

Thus discouraged, poor Joe did not dilate further on his grievances that evening, to Raymond's infinite relief. In course of time it came somehow or other to an end, and Raymond was left alone to meditate on the revelation which had made such havoc in his modes of thinking and feeling.

So Minna was not the daughter of the artificial-looking, artificial-feeling woman of the world whom he disliked, of the ponderous one-idea'd man of business whom he despised; she was not of, but only accidentally cast among, the frivolous pleasure-seekers and small-talk-mongers in the midst of whom he had gone with aversion and shrinking in quest

of her. If only the discovery had ended here! But unfortunately, while he had learned that which made Minna externally all that he would have her, he had simultaneously learned that of her character which made her what he would not have had her for all the world. Her origin was what he would have chosen that it should be, but on the other hand, she was herself ashamed of it. For the first time he was compelled to think of her as of a being with faults. And yet—so far was he from feeling the righteous indignation which might have been expected—what affected him most in the knowledge of her faults was not the reprobation with which they made him regard her, but fear of how they might make her regard him. She was ashamed of the poor old father who was pining after her, ashamed of the nice gentle little sister who loved her Good Heavens! what could she think of a son of Walter Lee's?

CHAPTER XVI.

MINNA'S TRIUMPH.

THE hours sped on, and brought with them in due course the momentous evening of the ball. All the preparations had been successfully—nay, triumphantly—completed. The ball-room and reception-rooms had received the final touch of decoration, and were absolutely dazzling in their combination of light and colour, and, more important still, Minna had emerged from the hands of her maid looking, as Mrs. Fanshawe did not scruple to declare, perfectly lovely. But proud as Mrs. Fanshawe was of the splendour of her rooms

and the beauty of her adopted daughter, she did not feel entirely happy for some little time after her guests had begun to assemble. The ball had been got up in order that Lord Fitz-John might be present at it, and until he actually appeared she could not be certain that it was not to turn out a dead failure.

A failure, however, the ball was not to be. A little later than the majority of the company, as befitted his exalted station, Lord Fitz-John arrived, and not only Lord Fitz-John but the Dowager Lady Fitz-John also—an honour which, after the chilling reception bestowed on herself and Minna the other day, Mrs. Fanshawe had hardly dared to count upon. And in truth it would not have been conferred only that Lady Fitz-John, like other mothers more anxious than prudent, had a notion that her presence might tend to keep her son out of mischief. So she had come, looking indeed very grim and stately, and wearing altogether an air of dignified martyrdom most unflattering to a hostess, but there she actually was in the flesh, representing a great incontrovertible fact to be chronicled on the morrow by all the local reporters and commented upon by all the local hangers-on of fashion. Mrs. Fanshawe was overjoyed.

But Mrs. Fanshawe's contentment was not yet shared by Minna. Even when Lord Fitz-John asked her hand for the first dance, and stood at the top of the room with her waiting for the music to strike up, though there is no denying that she was very much pleased, she was still far from being satisfied. The guest who was to her *the* guest of the evening, the guest who had been in her mind while she was dressing—the grand criterion—had not yet arrived, and even the twofold glory of Lord Fitz-John and his mother did not fill up the blank. She knew he would come—he had

promised to come — but why was he so late? Her eyes wandered restlessly hither and thither among the company, more particularly seeking the doorway, and so distracted was she from her proper business that she failed to catch her partner's opening remark to the effect that it was a warm evening, and all but made a mistake in the first figure.

The quadrille was about half over when a sudden bound at her heart warned her that the person she had expected was entering the room.

She was in the midst of an important evolution at the time, and was obliged to withdraw her eyes before his had found her. Nevertheless she observed, by a series of stealthy side-glances, that he made his way round by the wall to a little table standing by itself in a remote corner, where he took his place apart from all others and was soon apparently absorbed in a volume of prints. Minna was now, like Mrs. Fanshawe, wholly satisfied, and for the first time that evening began thoroughly to enjoy herself. Even Lord Fitz-John benefited by an arrival which might have been deemed prejudicial to his interests, for now that all doubt about Raymond's coming was at an end she was able to give her partner a much larger share of her attention than before. She had only one subject of preoccupation left—did Raymond know that it was Lord Fitz-John whom she was dancing with? But never mind—if he did not know the important fact already, he would be sure to find it out. She became all at once lively and smiling, and *piquante* in her replies, so that, before the dance was over, Lord Fitz-John had internally pronounced her a regular fascinating little devil beside whom the other girls in the room were absolutely nowhere.

‘You will enter me to dance the first waltz with you, won't

you?' he asked, when the quadrille was over and they were promenading the room together.

'Let me see, that comes next, I think,' she answered, referring to a little programme she carried in her sash. 'I should be most happy, I am sure, but unfortunately I have promised the first waltz to Captain Lennox. He asked me an hour ago nearly, and of course I could not refuse.'

She would have considered it horribly undignified to vouchsafe to an ordinary cavalier so elaborate an apology for not dancing with him. But the cavalier in the present case was a lord, and so was not ordinary at all.

'Ah! that's a pity. I like waltzing with you; you do it so well. But I suppose it's my own fault for not being here sooner to book you myself. Not that it was my fault either; my mother was so confoundedly long in dressing. It's my belief she wouldn't have been ready now if I had not sent up word to say that if she didn't come at once I would go without her. I knew that would frighten her—ha! ha! ha!'

The joke seemed to tickle his lordship's fancy amazingly, but, not knowing enough of the circumstances to see the point of it, Minna did not respond except by a faint smile. A very faint smile, and rather absent-looking too, for at the moment she was engaged in wondering why Raymond Lee, whom she had just passed so close that her dress almost touched him, had let her go by without once raising his eyes from the engraving he was poring over. He had been in a brown study, no doubt, but then there are some occasions on which people have no business to be in brown studies.

'Well, Miss Fanshawe,' went on his lordship, intent on getting as much amusement as possible out of his evening,

‘you have entered Captain Lennox for the next, but you will enter me for the next again, I hope. Come, you can’t refuse that?’

‘For the Lancers, you mean? Oh certainly, with a great deal of pleasure. I am so fond of the Lancers.’

‘And before anybody else gets hold of you you’ll promise to let me take you in to supper, eh? It spoils five per cent of the pleasure of supper to get stuck beside some scraggy old girl you are wishing all the time at the bottom of the sea.’

If she had thought about it, she might have had a notion that a man would not talk in this fashion to a lady whom he regarded quite as his own equal; but though she would have resented so liberal a use of slang in any other partner, she did not resent it in this one.

‘Oh Lord Fitz-John! Well, in that case I suppose I must promise—anything rather than let you form so uncharitable a wish as that.’

She laughed, and looked, as she felt, very much elated. And yet all the time she was a little disappointed too. She had been thinking that Raymond, who had told her that he never danced, would probably make a point of taking her in to supper.

‘Very well, that is settled then. Will you sit down here?’

The place thus chosen for her was in full view of Raymond Lee’s corner, and she felt grateful to the chooser as she took it. Raymond could not fail to see her now—could not fail to come over and speak to her. He need not be afraid of interrupting Lord Fitz-John, for Lord Fitz-John, though still standing near her, seemed to have exhausted his conversational resources for the present, and was whol-

ly occupied with caressing his moustache and looking about him.

But still Raymond made no sign; never even, so far as she could see, turning his head towards where she sat. She felt very much surprised and disappointed. It was doubtless because he thought she was engaged in conversation with Lord Fitz-John, though surely this was carrying deference to a most absurd extent. She was very proud of having the young nobleman so long at her side, and yet now she began to wish that he would go away.

He did go away presently, being carried off by Mrs. Fanshawe to be introduced to a very plain young lady with whom that sagacious matron judged that he might be safely trusted; and Minna's heart beat high with expectation. *Now* Raymond would certainly come to her, as certainly as she was sitting there, virtually alone, waiting for him.

No, Raymond did not come. One minute passed, and then another, and he was still turning and re-turning the leaves of that stupid book. What in the world did he mean by it? Was it possible he did not see her?—but that seemed out of the question. Or could it be that he was offended with her for receiving so much of Lord Fitz-John's homage? In that case what a tyrannical unreasonable creature he must be! The very idea made Minna feel quite hot. While she was still speculating, the music of the waltz struck up, and a young military dandy, who was Captain Lennox, approached to claim his partner. Minna rose and let herself be whirled off by him, smiling, and to all appearance in a state of high contentment, but with a pang at her heart, half of indignation, half of perplexity, that made each smile an effort. If Mr. Lee would not speak to her, why had he come at all?

Why had he come at all? This was the very question

which Raymond was asking of himself at the same moment.

He had not raised his head from his book since first he had taken up his station, but he had been secretly watching her all the time notwithstanding. He had never seen her dance before, and the sight caused the idea of winning her for himself to appear more incongruously extravagant than ever. To see her fluttering about the room in her light gauzy drapery—a butterfly in its native element—made him feel himself the most miserably self-blinded and self-deceived of mortals for imagining that their lives could ever be in common. She looked so happy, so radiant, so thoroughly at home surrounded by all that glittering garishness which he detested—in the midst of which he felt, and felt that he must appear to her, absurdly and irreconcilably out of place. And then he knew now that her pleasure in these scenes, and among these people so utterly repugnant to him, was as genuine as it seemed to be. She had chosen her way of life willingly and deliberately, in opposition to the manifest claims of duty and natural affection, in preference to the love of a father and a sister. How was it possible that the girl who was dancing yonder, in a cloud of lace, and blonde, and sweet perfumes, when she ought to have been helping her sister to mend her father's stockings in the farmhouse kitchen—how was it possible that she could ever listen to the love of one so grave and homely and plain-speaking as himself, unless indeed to extract from it a moment's passing amusement? She was as far divided from him as the moon from the child who cries for it—as far divided from him as she was from the father and sister whom she despised. Fool that he had been ever to think of her—double-dyed fool to let the recollection of her siren invi-

tation bring him to the ball that night to swell her triumph, in defiance of his better judgment, which after what he had learned yesterday, warned him to avoid her. So angry was he with himself that, for the first time since he had known her, he felt angry with Minna too.

Captain Lennox was a good dancer, and Minna enjoyed her waltz very much—would have enjoyed it, that is, if, whenever it brought her near Raymond, she had not seen him still sitting with downward-turned face and steadily averted eyes. Each time she passed him she found him always the same, and each time she grew more wondering and perplexed. At length, when the dance had already lasted several minutes, her suspense became too much for her, and she suddenly took a bold resolution which she put into execution the very next time she found herself approaching Raymond.

‘Oh! if you please, Captain Lennox, I am afraid I am getting giddy.’

The gallant captain’s practised arm brought her up directly.

‘Giddy! you don’t mean that. Will you sit down?’

‘I think I must, if you please. How very stupid of me! Oh! Mr. Lee, I am taking your seat, am I not? very kind of you, really. Oh! it is nothing, thank you—it is only that I am a little giddy and out of breath;’ and indeed this was true now. ‘And how long have you been here, Mr. Lee?’

Hypocritical Minna!

‘Oh! I don’t know. Not half an hour yet, I suppose. Time always drags with me in a place like this.’

The speech was not polite, but Raymond was not in a polite humour.

‘You have not been dancing yet then?’

‘No, I never dance.’

‘Dear me, how strange! O! Captain Lennox, how selfish I am to keep you waiting on me in this manner! You must join in that delightful waltz again, really. I wish I could too, for you know how fond I am of it, but I must not venture again this time. Suppose you go and ask Miss Wilson? She has not danced yet, I think; it will be quite a charity.’

The captain could not resist such an appeal, and went off to perform his mission, looking, however, not very well pleased with it. But Miss Wilson was not destined to profit by Minna’s benevolent consideration, for before the captain could reach her there was a general lull among the dancers, of which the musicians took advantage to play the concluding chords of the finale. The waltz was ended, and was no more to be resuscitated—the company dispersing themselves over the room at the discretion of the gentlemen, some of whom, preferring to retain their partners, promenaded it in the discussion of soft nothings, while others, desirous of emancipation for themselves, were politely anxious to find seats for the ladies.

Among the latter was Lord Fitz-John, who, having with the least possible delay disembarrassed himself of the ineligible young lady with whom Mrs. Fanshawe had so discreetly provided him, hastened to claim Minna’s promise for the next dance.

‘You have not forgot you are booked to me for the Lancers, I hope, Mis Fanshawe,’ he said, coming up to the little table where she sat with Raymond standing by her side. ‘Suppose we make sure of our places now?’

Minna found the suggestion singularly inopportune. Why, she had only just succeeded in settling herself beside Mr. Lee

when here she was asked to break off the conversation ere it was well begun. She hesitated a moment, and then answered:

‘Oh, Lord Fitz-John’ (the name pronounced very audibly), ‘I am extremely sorry, but I must beg you to excuse me this time. That waltz has quite knocked me up; I must really rest a little before dancing again.’

‘Oh indeed! that’s awkward,’ said his lordship, turning on his heel instantly with a suppressed whistle. This was the first time that a young lady had ever pleaded fatigue as an excuse for not dancing with him, and he did not find the sensation agreeable. ‘Confound the girl, what does she mean by it?’ he thought as he walked off. ‘It looks almost as if she was in love with that fellow there that she won’t leave him. Damned impertinent little hussy, she don’t get hold of me again in a hurry.’

If Raymond Lee could only have looked into Lord Fitz-John’s mind just then, and seen what construction Minna’s conduct was capable of bearing! But so ungratefully dull was he of comprehension, that it never occurred to him to think that she had made a sacrifice in sending away that heavy-eyed thick-lipped young man.

Minna hardly realised the extent of the sacrifice herself, so pleased she was to have secured an interval for undisturbed conversation with Mr. Lee.

‘I wonder you don’t dance,’ she resumed, turning towards him again. ‘It is so delightful.’

Another proof of the frivolity and love of pleasure which opposed an insurmountable barrier to his hopes!

‘Is it? My taste is not so good—or so bad—as to find it so.’

‘Perhaps that’s because you don’t try, Mr. Lee.’

If he had asked her to dance with him at that moment, she would probably have stood up with him in sheer forgetfulness of what Lord Fitz-John would think.

‘It is true that I don’t try. I detest it too much for that.’

‘Detest it! Oh dear! what strong language! Then I am afraid a dancing-party must be a terrible affliction to you.’

Her petulance was beginning to array itself in arms against his sternness. But then she was only fencing in fun, and he was parrying in earnest.

‘You are quite right. I hate parties, and ought to have nothing to do with them.’

‘And I love them,’ she answered, shaking her head wilfully. ‘And as for dancing, why I positively adore it.’

Poor Minna! she thought they had got up such a pretty little quarrel!

He looked at her bitterly for a few seconds. What a fool he had been, to be sure!

‘Well, Miss Fanshawe, I will leave you in possession of the field,’ he said, with an effort at carelessness. ‘It is time for me to be going now.’

‘Going!’ repeated Minna, hardly believing her ears. ‘Why, we shall not have supper for an hour and more.’

‘Ah! but you see I keep early hours, Miss Fanshawe. By the time you are at supper I shall probably be asleep.’ (Asleep! what a mockery!) ‘Good evening; you must really excuse me.’

‘Oh! of course we would not detain you for the world. Good evening, Mr. Lee.’

They shook hands coldly, and in a moment more Raymond was making his way round the dancers towards the door. Minna looked after him as he went, and felt almost as if she hated him. Almost—not quite; or surely she would not

have found such difficulty as she did in forcing back the tears which were ready to spring to her eyes.

‘I wonder what he would say if he knew I might be Lady Fitz-John,’ she thought to herself indignantly. ‘Yes, indeed, Lady Fitz-John—for I believe I could be if I liked.’

At that instant a couple came whirling past her in the final galop. Minna happened to raise her eyes towards them, and to her astonishment recognised—Lord Fitz-John and Arabella Vesey! So Lord Fitz-John had got hold of that girl Vesey again! How pleased she would be! And Minna felt decidedly the reverse of pleased.

The dance came to an end immediately afterwards; and Minna, keeping watch from her solitary corner, saw with increasing chagrin Lord Fitz-John draw his partner’s arm through his own and begin to perambulate the room with her, apparently engrossed in earnest and even confidential conversation. They came near Minna presently, and she could not help fancying that Arabella glanced at her with furtive triumph. As for Lord Fitz-John, he certainly did not look at her at all.

Minna felt very angry, and the object of her anger was not Lord Fitz-John, but Raymond Lee.

‘Yes, Lord Fitz-John is offended with me, that is plain enough. And it is all *his* fault, *his* the mean-spirited wretch that I was. I wonder what I meant by it, that I do. But it’s over now; he’s gone, and I don’t suppose I shall so much as see him again, and I’m sure I don’t care. How odiously pleased that girl Arabella looks! *She* would not throw away the chance of being Lady Fitz-John, I’ll be bound. Perhaps she won’t get it, though. We’ll see.’

But the more Minna looked, the more apprehensive she

became that perhaps Arabella would get it. If there was one art more than another in which Lord Fitz-John excelled, it was the art of 'serving out' those who had offended or thwarted him. He had a fine instinct which taught him with almost unerring precision where people were most vulnerable, and what mode of treatment they would feel to be most annoying. So for another hour he devoted himself pretty exclusively to Arabella, with whom Minna had the mortification to see him dancing or talking nearly every time she looked towards him. And that it was a mortification for Minna is not to be denied. It was not only the fact of being slighted by Lord Fitz-John which grieved her; it was also the fact that what she regarded as her defeat and Arabella's triumph was witnessed by a whole roomful of people. Every-body was remarking that Miss Vesey seemed to have made a conquest—a 'catch,' as one of Minna's partners observed to her—and the consequence was that Minna felt herself publicly humiliated. She almost forgot Mr. Lee and his unpardonable rudeness in speculations whether Lord Fitz-John would speak to her again that evening. Surely it would be absolutely uncivil of him if he neglected to claim her promise of letting him take her in to supper.

And, as it proved, Lord Fitz-John did not carry his rancour to this length. When the hour of supper arrived, he seemed to have decided that it might be time to forgive, if not to forget, and once more sought out Minna.

'You are not too tired for supper, I hope, Miss Fanshawe?'

In this manner did his lordship extend the olive-branch. Minna might not have accepted it, proffered thus ungraciously, from a less august hand, but Lord Fitz-John, being Lord Fitz-John, she caught at it at once—eagerly and even gratefully. Her selflove had that evening been sorely wounded,

and the offer of a lordly arm was as precious balm applied to it. She felt re-instated in the opinion of others and in her own, and allowed herself to be forgiven very meekly.

She was on her best behaviour during supper, making it a point to listen to all Lord Fitz-John's remarks, and see all Lord Fitz-John's jokes, to the exclusion of everybody else's. In a word, she made herself as agreeable to him as possible, and Minna could make herself very agreeable when she chose. Her good conduct was not without its recompense. Gradually she was taken back into favour, and before they had left table she had actually made such progress as to be engaged to her noble cavalier for the first dance after supper. When matters had reached this point, she glanced towards Arabella Vesey with a thrill of exultation. She only wished that Mr. Lee had been there too.

In due course supper was finished, and in due course also the first after-supper quadrille was organised. This time Minna did not plead fatigue when Lord Fitz-John reminded her of her engagement, but accepted his arm with becoming alacrity. The pride of her triumph made her appear very beautiful as she took her place by his side, and the young man, who moreover had drunk pretty freely of the excellent champagne plentifully supplied by Mrs. Fanshawe, looked at her with more admiration than ever he had felt yet—admiration which showed itself perhaps a little too boldly and familiarly in his glances, but she did not mind that. There was the kind of girl for him to stake his money on, he inwardly affirmed—clean-limbed, fine action, plenty of go in her—worth fifty of the broomsticks in petticoats his mother wanted to cram down his throat.

‘You’re not tired now, at all events, Miss Fanshawe,’ he

began, when their share of the first figure was over. 'By Jove, I never saw any one looking fresher in my life.'

'Oh no! I am not tired now. This delightful quadrille—I am enjoying it so much.'

'Are you? That's lucky; I was afraid I might be spoiling it for you.'

'You! Oh Lord Fitz-John; what do you mean?'

'Why, by dancing with you, to be sure. I thought a little while ago you had had enough of my dancing.'

Minna laughed awkwardly at the reproach, thinking angrily the while of the renegade for whose sake she had incurred it.

'What an idea! You must consider me very unappreciative. And you such a good dancer!'

'I thought perhaps you didn't care for good dancers.'

'It would be strange if I did not like good dancers when I am so fond of dancing. And I am so fond of dancing—oh! I can't tell you how passionately fond I am of it.'

She spoke with an extraordinary emphasis which was not artificial, for she was thinking how Raymond Lee had said he hated it.

His lordship smiled, and pulled his moustache complacently.

'You are passionately fond of good dancers too, then?'

Minna blushed, but was relieved from the necessity of answering by finding herself called on to perform in the second figure.

'Little devil! I declare I believe she *is* fond of me,' thought her partner, pulling at his moustache again.

Meanwhile, this renewal of friendly relations between Miss Fanshawe and Lord Fitz-John had been observed with

a great deal of interest (pleasurable only in the case of Mrs. Fanshawe) by some three or four anxious female spectators. Among these was Lady Fitz-John, who watched every look and movement of the pair with lynx-eyed jealousy. The significance of Minna's last blush had not been lost on her, and she absolutely trembled as she noted it. She hadt been sitting at the side of the room opposite to that at which her son stood with his partner, but now she crossed over on the pretext of examining some pictures on the wall behind them.

When they had got through the second figure Lord Fitz-John renewed the conversation.

'Talking of good dancers, I'll give you the name of one if you like. That Miss Vesey I've been dancing with this evening—she's a first-rater.'

He wanted to see how Miss Fanshawe would look under the influence of jealousy.

'Is she indeed? You see, ladies not being allowed to dance together, I have had no opportunity of forming an opinion.'

'Oh! but she is, though, I can tell you. A deuced fine girl altogether—Miss Vesey—don't you think so?'

'I dare say. But I am so little of a judge.'

The third figure began now. In the course of it Minna had to go forward to make a curtsey to her *vis-à-vis*, and at that moment Lord Fitz-John heard a well-known voice whisper sternly in his ear:

'Albert, your conduct is disgraceful.'

He frowned, and Lady Fitz-John, seeing nothing of the frown and only feeling that she had discharged a sacred duty, resumed her contemplation of the pictures, and

presently took the opportunity of returning to her seat, highly satisfied with her performance.

Poor woman! what a very bad manager she was!

The next time that there was an interval of repose, Lord Fitz-John said:

‘Yes, she is a fine girl—uncommon. And yet do you know there’s some one else in the room a great deal more after my fancy than she is.’

‘Indeed!’ said Minna, pulling her fan open, and then shutting it again.

‘A fact, upon my honour. And I think you know something of her, Miss Fanshawe.’

Minna’s heart had never yet quickened its beat at anything Lord Fitz-John had said to her, but it did now; not, however, so much with pleasure as with sudden alarm. For it seemed to her that things were coming to a crisis, and she did not want to confront a crisis just then.

‘Do I really?’ she answered, attempting a light laugh. ‘That is very mysterious.’

She felt that this was like inviting him to be explicit, and was angry with herself. And yet she had not known what else to say. Oh! if only he would change the conversation—if only he would give her till to-morrow!

‘Is it? I hate mysteries. Shall I speak plainer, then?’

‘Oh! Lord Fitz-John!’ she murmured, opening and shutting her fan again. She was getting horribly nervous. What should she say to him if he went further? She did not want to say yes—not just then at least—and yet, he being a lord, how could she say no?

She was looking very beautiful in her trepidation, and her partner fixed his eyes on her with great approbation, then

raised them and glanced towards his mother. The infatuated woman was scowling at him with all her might.

He looked at Minna again, and whispered:

‘Do you know I think the girl I mean might be Lady Fitz-John if she chose?’

It had come then! Her heart gave a great leap, and then seemed to cease beating altogether.

‘Does she choose?’ persisted Lord Fitz-John, bending over her to catch her answer. ‘It is all as you like, you know. Does she choose? Or come, do *you* choose?—that’s fairer.’

‘You are forgetting us, Miss Fanshawe,’ good-humouredly remonstrated one of her *vis-à-vis*.

She was wanted again in the dance, and went forward eagerly, thankful for the interruption. It gave her at least a moment for reflection. What should she do? Ask Lord Fitz-John for time? but that would be tantamount to a confession that she did not care for him, would give him an opportunity of retracting his offer altogether. And why should she want time? she knew very well that she would not say no. Say no to a man who was ready to make her a peeress! how could she? After Mr. Lee had treated her so shamefully—had indeed downright insulted her! But he would see she had some spirit left. And yonder was that odious Mrs. Vesey sitting watching her with her horrid greengrey eyes, for all the world like a spiteful cat! What would the woman say if she knew it was the future Lady Fitz-John she was looking at?

‘Do you choose then?’ repeated Lord Fitz-John when they had returned to their places.

‘You must speak to papa and mamma about that,’ she answered, holding down her head.

‘That means yes, I suppose? Come, it isn’t fair to keep a fellow on the tenter-hooks like that.’

‘I suppose it does,’ she brought out faintly.

She was singularly moved as the words passed her lips, but could not have said whether it was with triumph or regret.

‘Very well, then it’s settled. You’re pleased, and I’m pleased, and I don’t care who isn’t. But I’ll do it all in form, and will call on Mr. Fanshawe to-morrow.’

He glanced defiantly in the direction of his mother, and then put his arm round Minna’s waist, and whirled her off in the galop of the last figure.

So it was over, and Minna was engaged to Lord Fitz-John!

She never remembered how she got through the rest of the evening. She danced once or twice more with her accepted lover, and once or twice again when he and his mother had gone away; but, though acquitting herself correctly of all her steps and figures, felt in a state of stupor all the time. A strangely uncomfortable dreamy state it was, out of which she every now and then made a violent effort to stimulate herself with the recollection—the more stimulating that it always brought with it something not unlike a pang—that she was to be the wife of a peer.

CHAPTER XVII.

TOO LATE.

RAYMOND had told Minna that he would be asleep by the time she and her guests were at supper, but in reality he scarcely slept all that night. Memories of her, of how she

had looked, of what she had said and done, floated unceasingly through his brain, making sleep well-nigh impossible; and in spite of the displeasure she had so recently caused him, he did not attempt to drive them away. But in truth his displeasure, so far as she was the object of it, had all evaporated now. He had been very unreasonably angry, and, like all unreasonable passions, his anger in subsiding had left the elements of reaction behind it. He was scarcely out of her presence before he began to wonder what she had done that had made him use her so roughly. He understood from her last words that she was offended, and this made him understand also that till then her petulance had been all in sport. What a churl he had been! and, worse still, what a churl he must appear in her eyes! Then he remembered how prettily she always flushed up when she saw him, how persuasively she had spoken the other morning when she had asked him to come to the ball (she little knew what a barbarian she was inviting), how archly she had rallied him about not dancing at the very time he had been making himself most disagreeable. And as he thought of these things, her faults towards him dwindled down into Lilliputian proportions, while his towards her expanded till they filled all his mental horizon. But if she had indeed ever cared for him, there was still time to make amends by asking her pardon and confessing the secret of his moroseness. If his love was anything to her, she would forgive offences into which its very intensity had betrayed him. If not, why it was better that he should know the worst at once. He had endured suspense till he could endure no more, and he would put an end to it now at any cost.

Thus did Raymond Lee take the resolution before which he had so long paused.

Early in the afternoon of the following day, he was on his way to the Fanshaws' house, in the hope of finding Minna at home and alone as he had found her the other morning. If she was not there, or if Mrs. Fanshawe was there too, he had made up his mind to write rather than incur further delay, but he had an instinct that his best chance lay in seeing Minna face to face, and receiving her answer from her own lips, unbiassed by Mrs. Fanshawe's influence.

It looked at first as if fortune were disposed to favour him. To his first query, whether Mrs. Fanshawe was at home, he received a reply in the negative (he little suspected that she was out spreading the news of Minna's engagement); and to his second, whether he could see Miss Fanshawe, the footman returned a doubtful answer which a well-timed *douceur* converted into an unhesitating affirmative. The fact was, my young lady had had a bad headache this morning, and had only just come downstairs, but she was at home—oh dear yes! she was at home—and quite at leisure. Would Mr. Lee please to step this way? He was shown through the hall, where a man in an apron was filling a basket with crumpled paper rose-buds, to a little breakfast parlour at the back, which in the confusion made by last night's festivities—even the sanctity of Minna's boudoir had been invaded by something like a cart-load of surplus furniture—was for the time the only available reception-room.

Here Minna was sitting by herself, gazing dreamily away from the piece of embroidery she held in her hand at the flower-beds outside the window, and, as Raymond observed when she raised her head, looking very pale.

His entrance evidently took her altogether by surprise.

When his name was announced she started violently, and cast a quick nervous glance round the room, almost as though seeking a way of escape. But none such presented itself, and without speaking she laid her hand for an instant in that which he held out to her, and then withdrew it to motion him to a chair. They both seated themselves in silence; for some seconds it seemed as if each had lost the faculty of speech. At last Minna found the oppression of the situation intolerable, and with an effort began:

‘What nice weather we have to-day!’

Raymond did not answer; he was considering how to enter on a far more momentous topic. Perhaps Minna had some instinctive sense of what was in his mind, for again she looked round anxiously. But still no chance of rescue or escape was visible, and the next moment she heard Raymond’s voice saying:

‘Miss Fanshawe, I have come to ask you to forgive me for behaving as I did last night.’

She half rose from her chair as though to fly from the room; then, almost powerless, sank back again, and murmured, with lips so tremulous that they could hardly articulate:

‘Forgive you, Mr. Lee?’

‘Yes—if you can. I was a brute, a savage—what you will. I was angry with you—angry with you for no better reason than that I was afraid you were beyond my reach. Can you forgive me for being afraid of that?’

‘Mr. Lee!’ she stammered.

He rose and came close to where she sat.

‘Can you forgive me for loving you?’ he asked, looking at her earnestly. ‘Can you forgive me for making you my one thought sleeping and waking. for making the hope of winning you the one thing worth living for?’

She did not wish to escape now. With him standing so near her, with his voice vibrating in her ear and her heart, she seemed to be under a magnetic spell which dissipated every impression save its own. The memory which had oppressed her with such terror a moment ago faded away like darkness before light; every idea, every sense, was merged in the consciousness that Raymond's voice was speaking and telling her that he loved her. She sat still, trembling and with bated breath, her eyes cast down, but with heart and soul straining themselves to listen.

His look was fastened on her face, and a thrill of hope rushed through him at what he read there.

'Minna,' he whispered, 'will you be my wife?'

The last word was like an electric shock to her, awakening her in an instant out of the dream in which she had been held spell-bound. She remembered that she was to be a wife, but not Raymond Lee's.

'Oh! do not ask me! do not speak to me. It is impossible. Oh! pray, pray let me go. It is quite impossible.'

She stood up and tried to pass him; she would fain have fled from him, and, if she could, from herself too.

But Raymond's hopes had risen too high to let themselves be dashed down so easily. And then her very agitation gave him the encouragement that her words seemed to deny. He caught her hand impetuously.

'Impossible — why? Nothing but your will can make it impossible, you know. Is it impossible by your will?'

She tried to draw her hand away, but could not. An explanation was necessary, and an explanation there must be.

'I am engaged,' she said in a low voice which strove to be calm. 'I am engaged to Lord Fitz-John.'

She did not know why she added anything to that first

fact which alone Raymond had a right to be told, but it was because the word 'Lord' had a reassuring sound of which in that moment she could not deny herself the comfort. When Moses Primrose brought home the spectacle-cases, he evidently laid great stress upon their being all shagreen. She knew that her sacrifice had been enormous, and liked to think that she had something to show for it.

Raymond Lee let go her hand as though its touch had burned him.

The name of Minna's betrothed had produced a very different effect on him from any on which she could have calculated. If she had said she was engaged to Captain Lennox or any other of the handsome young dandies whom he had, sometimes with a feeling of despair, seen hovering about her, he would have deemed such a choice, if unworthy of her, at least natural and explicable, and would have accepted his fate in respectful silence. But he had seen Lord Fitz-John at the ball last night, and knew that he could not be personally attractive in the eyes of any girl—dandy-admirer or not. He had heard some of the current reports as to Lord Fitz-John's character and tastes (he remembered that Minna had heard them too), and knew that he was as much wanting in moral and intellectual as in external qualities. And putting all these things together, he could only conclude that Minna had sold herself for rank. The idea filled him with a contemptuous disgust which he made no effort to conceal.

'Lord Fitz-John!' he repeated, in a tone of such supreme and concentrated scorn that through all the confusion of her senses Minna was struck by it.

'What do you mean?' she asked faintly.

'I mean that I know the man can be nothing to you—'

except a future husband' — he answered, losing all control over himself in the angry bitterness of his spirit. 'I mean that I know you are selling yourself. Or letting others sell you, perhaps,' he added eagerly, as the idea of Mrs. Fanshawe passed through his mind, bringing with it sudden relief. 'If this is Mrs. Fanshawe's doing, for God's sake take care. What she advises is not for your good, but for her own ambition. A real mother would sooner see you dead than married to that man.'

'A real mother!' faltered Minna. How had Raymond come to learn so much of her?

'Yes, I know that woman is not your mother, and I thank God for it. If only I could have known too that you had done your duty instead of insulting those who showed it to you, that you had gone home to your father when you heard he was pining after you. Oh! if they could have told me that too, I think it would have made me happier than to have been assured of Heaven. But now! — Minna, I used to be afraid of what you would think of my father; I have cause to be ashamed of him, I know; but now I see that you have more cause to be ashamed of your conduct towards yours.'

Minna stood dumbfounded at these upbraidings — so much amazed that for the time she had not even spirit to resent them. That Raymond should know the jealously guarded secret of her humble parentage was in itself a surprise that nearly overwhelmed her; yet more overwhelming still was it to find herself fallen in his estimation, not because her connexions were vulgar and unpresentable, but because she claimed to be better than they. Actually, if she had taken the advice so impertinently tendered by that odious creature Joe, if she had exiled herself from all the elegances and

refinements of civilization to live in a sanded kitchen amid fumes of broth and tobacco-smoke, she would have stood better in Raymond Lee's opinion than she did as Mr. and Mrs. Fanshawe's daughter. The fact, as she gradually realised it, almost took away her breath.

'Minna, I may never meet you after to-day; your path is not my path—I ought to have seen that when I heard how you despised your father and your sister. But if others are persuading you in this matter, for the love of Heaven remember that those are not your friends who would have you the wife of a gambler and a drunkard. Do not think I am speaking for my own sake—I have given up all thought of you for myself, God knows.'

Whether it was the disrespectful terms applied to her betrothed or the emphatic renunciation of herself that most galled her, Minna's spirit began to rise at this.

'Mr. Lee, you must not say these things to me!' she exclaimed vehemently. 'You have no right to speak to me in this manner—you know you have not.'

'Have I not? Oh! to be sure, everybody who speaks to you is expected to speak according to drawing-room rule and measure, I suppose. You torture people for your amusement, and then require them to keep their contortions within the bounds of elegance and decorum. If it comes to a question of right, I may ask what right had you to make me suffer as you have done? What right had you to feed my suspense from day to day with your pretty smiles and then put an end to it at the last by telling me you have let yourself be promised to Lord Fitz-John? Lord Fitz-John of all men in the world! Lord Fitz-John!'

But the fierceness of his chiding, instead of over-awing her into acquiescence in its justice, only increased the

wrathfulness that was fast filling her heart against him. What! he dared to speak as if he alone had been kept in suspense! Had he not made her suffer last night? had he not made her watch and wait for him in vain from day to day? And now that he had let her slip through his hands, he came to mock her with an offer of his love, and, when he was told it was too late, presumed to reproach her with the consequences of his own tardiness. He thought of nobody but himself—the selfish tyrannical unjust man! And to talk of her smiles and blushes too! Then he had noticed something in her manner, and yet had delayed so long. But she would let him see that all that nonsense was over now.

‘Mr. Lee, you are quite mistaken. I have not let myself be promised to anybody against my will, and I beg you will not speak as if I had. I consider your remarks very insulting.’

‘You must forgive them to a man who has just had the greatest mistake of his life disclosed to him,’ said Raymond bitterly. ‘I would as soon have believed in a river flowing backwards to its source as in your being worldly and self-seeking, unless I had it from your own lips. It ought to have been enough for me to know how you had used your father and your sister, yet you see it was not. But I suppose I must believe now.’

Minna was silent. He might believe what he liked, she told herself proudly. Worldly and self-seeking! So that was what he thought of her! Well, there was no accounting for people’s notions.

He looked at her an instant, then turned abruptly and went towards the door. Here he paused, and looked again; it seemed as though he half expected that she would speak and defend herself. But she still stood silent, holding her head defiantly erect, and made no sign.

‘What a hateful world we live in!’ cried Raymond passionately as he withdrew his eyes. In another moment he was out of the room and out of the house, walking along in the pleasant sunshine, but receiving no ray of it into his soul, and feeling as if the source of light and brightness were extinguished for ever. All creation seemed to have changed its aspect; there could be no goodness or beauty in it since what he had deemed best and most beautiful had proved unworthy. Minna had bartered herself for a title, and he felt for the time as though he must hate the whole world for her default. Had she not been as the whole world to him?

And how fared it with Minna meanwhile?

She did not retain her defiant attitude long. No sooner had the echoes of Raymond’s footsteps died away than she sank wearily down on her chair, letting her head droop heavily forward, as one to whom life has become a burden. Yet she did not weep; the anger in her heart would have made her regard weeping as a humiliation. For though she had relaxed the outward show of defiance, she was angry with Raymond still — angry because he had dared to assail her with insolent and unmannerly reproaches, more angry yet perhaps because she felt that, spoken before, those reproaches might have saved her. But now they had come too late.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.



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Raymond's heroine

Bd.: 1

Leipzig (1867)

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